HERMENEUTICS FOR EVERYONE

A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR READING AND STUDYING YOUR BIBLE

DANIEL GOEPFRICH

FOREWORD BY PAUL MILES

"Charles Ryrie informs us, in his *Basic Theology*, that everyone is a theologian. This is because everybody has thoughts or ideas about God. Owing to this reality every person also needs to be able to read the Bible for themselves. The Bible is not only a book for scholars, academics, and ministry professionals. The Bible is for every single person. Even a mature believer may wonder if what they are seeing in the Bible is correct. If scholars disagree, what hope do the rest of us have at understanding God's word and how it is meant to shape our lives? This is where Dr. Goepfrich's book becomes not only necessary, but vital. Advanced concepts are dealt with and explained with simple and effective illustrations, in measured progressive steps. *Hermeneutics for Everyone* is a much needed contribution to the modern environment.

"As the president of Fort Collins Bible College and the primary Bible Study Methods professor at that institution, I am thrilled to be able to include this book and all the resources that it offers in our Bible Study Methods courses. This book is approachable and profound. It will help make the word of God accessible to everyone."

Dr. Bradley W. Maston, Colorado, USA • President, Fort Collins Bible College

"This is a fantastic book for those just starting and for those needing to refresh their skills. It's concise, yet thorough; enjoyable, yet gets right to the point. It's not just a book to read; it's a book to immerse yourself into, and it's also interactive. Whether you're looking for inductive study, word study, topical study, or even Bible surveys, this book is for you."

Dr. Stephen E. House, Texas, USA

"Before reading about Bible translation philosophies, I thought the best Bible version I have to study is the one with simple expressions. But after reading and understanding the approaches to Bible translation, I came to the conclusion that the best Bible version is not the one with simple expressions but a version that creates balance between formal translation (focused on word-to-word translation from the original manuscript) and dynamic translation (focused on the intended meaning of the words). I also concluded that the balance between the formal and the dynamic approaches should be an integral part of Bible interpretation."

Dennis Hanson, Ghana, West Africa

"Goepfrich sets three goals for his work, to be 'a solid teach and reference resource,' 'useful for people at all levels of Christian maturity,' and 'for it to be practical and not just theoretical.' After reading through it all, I found nothing at all overwhelming in the information. This is an accessible book that will work well for those who have an interest in going further on their own.

"In reality, the modern Christian library contains a good many books on how to study the Bible, most of which fall toward the more academic end of the spectrum, designed for those in professional ministry and theological education. Dr. Goepfrich aims instead for 'everyone.' Offering a simple-to-use method, sensible motivations for its employment, and a friendly tone of writing, I believe he succeeds on all counts."

Mark Perkins, Tahiti, French Polynesia • President, Evanelia Tahiti

"There is a crisis within churches that this book addresses. Churches are not teaching their people in the pews how to study the Bible, so I am impressed with this book from Dr. Daniel Goepfrich. We have been adding Dr. Goepfrich's other books to our curriculum and recommended study items to help people move from sitting in the pews to becoming disciples. This book is remarkably well-written and easy to understand for non-theologians. A better description is the content is simple enough to grasp and meaty enough to want to get people excited about studying the Bible. We appreciate Dr. Goepfrich's efforts on the pewsitters' behalf."

Ric Joyner, Florida, USA • CEO, Biblestudycompany.com

"This book came about at the right time. Yes, all of us as believers, we love reading and understanding God's word, and yes, it isn't that easy to fully understand with no aid! But the question always remained, 'What should we use, therefore?' I appreciated how *Hermeneutics* spans through all questions I've heard about Bible studying and interpretation. Questions about translations and which one is the best, how and when to use other reader's notes, etc. It was worth your input to bring to us such a great piece. I joyfully await its publishing and availability so every believer can read and know the way to go."

Ssebunya Caleb, Uganda, East Africa

"Dr. Goepfrich has written a fantastic book on Bible study and Hermeneutics! The reader will be well-equipped to study God's word according to a literal grammatical historical hermeneutic using the inductive method of Bible study. I believe this book will be a beneficial resource not only in the classroom, but also to every believer in the church."

Ian Bacon, Missouri, USA • Program Director of Bible & Theology, Calvary University

"Daniel Goepfrich has succeeded in living up to his newest book's title, *Hermeneutics for Everyone*. Here is a book that any believer can use as a practical guide in how to study and apply the Bible. The author has given a clear and concise approach to Bible study and includes practical questions and exercises that will help any believer put into practice the principles taught here. The book also includes a beginning section on the inspiration and authority of the Bible. The appendix on dispensationalism is a help to anyone who wants to better understand this approach to Scripture. Highly recommended!"

Alex Konya, Hungary, Europe • Regional Director in Europe and Eurasia (retired)
Word of Life Fellowship International

"*Hermeneutics For Everyone* is a practical, down-to-earth resource. It serves as a tool to help everyone who reads it understand what their Bible is and how to study it. Whether you have been reading the Bible for years, or never at all, this book will equip you with the tools to understand for yourself what God says in His Word.

"This book stands out as an outstanding resource because rather than simply giving you an interpretation of Scripture, it equips you to form your own interpretation of Scripture, test that interpretation, and submit to God's Word in your life. I am very excited about this book! The material is very important for everyone, and it is presented in a way that anyone can understand and interact with. I believe that the author has written a very practical guide to studying the Bible and I hope that many people will put this material to use as they study God's Word for themselves!"

Andrew Friend, Oklahoma, USA

"As a member and Elder of Oak Tree Community Church, I've been fortunate to listen to Daniel's messages for over twenty years. He's always had this crazy notion that everyone can learn theology. It turns out that he was right. With this book, he's encapsulated his training and pastoral and teaching experiences to give us a practical way to interpret the Bible for ourselves so we all can know God better and love him more. He's even given us 'Do it yourself' space so we can individually work through passages then be ready for group discussions."

Gary Day, Indiana, USA • Elder, Oak Tree Community Church

"I'm really grateful for the book. The time I have spent reading it has helped me improve my hermeneutics and has made my Bible study more effective. I appreciate the time and sacrifice made to put this together."

Kateu Wilson, Uganda, East Africa

"As a Christian college student, I found the book to be priceless in understanding HOW to study the Bible and not just read it. The language is clear and concise. The 'Do it Yourself' sections really help in obtaining further clarity. It's always easier when 'we do it ourselves' and see it written down. The wide margins are smart and handy. A real asset in my growth as a Christian and student. I highly recommend it to every Christian college as well as to every church that teaches Bible study."

Peggy Helfman, Indiana, USA

"This book great. It's going to be a challenge for someone who reads it with a presupposition of what they think correct Bible study is, but it will be highly beneficial for anyone who reads the book with an open mind. I would really love for Sunday school teachers the world over to read this book so that the foundation of correct hermeneutics can be built right from the beginning so that everyone who reads the Bible does so from a point of desiring to learn God, grow, and build a spiritual relationship with God and not from the presumption that the Bible is a 'feel good' book written to cater for unstable emotions."

Akullo Juliet, Uganda, East Africa

"Daniel Goepfrich has provided access to what can be a complicated pursuit – that of Bible interpretation. Goepfrich's pleasing conversational style replaces the dry and stuffy manner that can sometimes accompanies such works and makes this book surprisingly easy to read and easy to understand. Because of its simple, clear presentation, this study can easily be used for teenage and adult users who would have little or no background in hermeneutics. However, as a pastor with undergraduate and graduate degrees in Biblical Studies, I found reading this entire work refreshing, reinforcing and even helpful.

"It is easily the most approachable book on this topic I have seen and is certainly an excellent resource for any individual, church class, pastor, or professor. While it is not the deep, detailed, often complicated work you would find in a seminary hermeneutics textbook, it most definitely is the first book to use to bring Bible students safely into sound Bible study practices. I highly recommend this to individuals and those that teach others without reservation."

Kevin Subra, Iowa, USA • Pastor, Church Revitalizer

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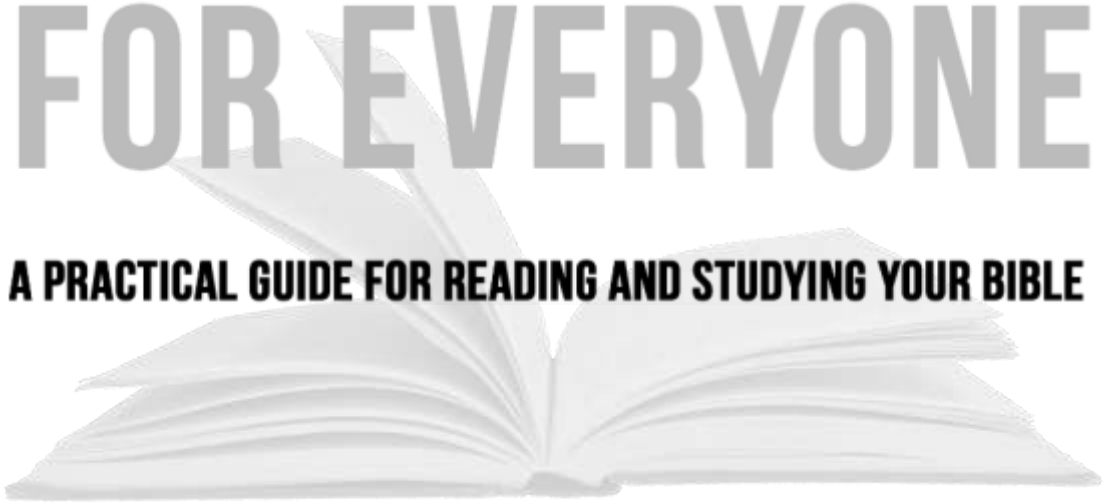

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For the many students
whom I have been privileged to teach throughout the world.
May you always follow Ezra's pattern
in whatever ministry God entrusts to you.

"Now Ezra had dedicated himself to the **study** of the law of the Lord,
to its **observance**, and to **teaching** its statutes and judgments in Israel."
(Ezra 7:10)

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Abbreviations

Books of the Bible and references to the Old Testament ("OT") and New Testament ("NT") are generally abbreviated throughout this book as follows.

Genesis	*Gen*	Ecclesiastes	*Eccl*
Exodus	*Ex*	Song of Songs	*Song*
Leviticus	*Lev*	Isaiah	*Isa*
Numbers	*Num*	Jeremiah	*Jer*
Deuteronomy	*Deut*	Lamentations	*Lam*
Joshua	*Josh*	Ezekiel	*Ezek*
Judges	*Judg*	Daniel	*Dan*
Ruth	*Ruth*	Hosea	*Hos*
1 Samuel	*1 Sam*	Joel	*Joel*
2 Samuel	*2 Sam*	Amos	*Amos*
1 Kings	*1 Kings*	Obadiah	*Obad*
2 Kings	*2 Kings*	Jonah	*Jonah*
1 Chronicles	*1 Chr*	Micah	*Micah*
2 Chronicles	*2 Chr*	Nahum	*Nahum*
Ezra	*Ezra*	Habakkuk	*Hab*
Nehemiah	*Neh*	Zephaniah	*Zeph*
Esther	*Est*	Haggai	*Hag*
Job	*Job*	Zechariah	*Zech*
Psalms	*Ps*	Malachi	*Mal*
Proverbs	*Prov*		

Matthew	*Matt*	1 Timothy	*1 Tim*
Mark	*Mark*	2 Timothy	*2 Tim*
Luke	*Luke*	Titus	*Titus*
John	*John*	Philemon	*Phlm*
Acts	*Acts*	Hebrews	*Heb*
Romans	*Rom*	James	*Jam*
1 Corinthians	*1 Cor*	1 Peter	*1 Pet*
2 Corinthians	*2 Cor*	2 Peter	*2 Pet*
Galatians	*Gal*	1 John	*1 John*
Ephesians	*Eph*	2 John	*2 John*
Philippians	*Phil*	3 John	*3 John*
Colossians	*Col*	Jude	*Jude*
1 Thessalonians	*1 Thess*	Revelation	*Rev*
2 Thessalonians	*2 Thess*		

Commonly used Bible translations are abbreviated as follows and may have one or more editions referenced by publication date or edition.

New English Translation	*NET*
New American Standard Bible	*NASB*
English Standard Version	*ESV*
Christian Standard Bible	*CSB*
New International Version	*NIV*
New Living Translation	*NLT*
New King James Version	*NKJV*
King James Version	*KJV*

Foreword

The almighty Creator of the universe has written a book, and He wants us to read it. But how should we understand what He wrote? That is what this book is all about. The fancy word for "how to understand something" is *hermeneutics*. The *eu* is pronounced like oo, so *her-men-oo-tics*. The word is typically (but not always) treated as a singular rather than a plural, much like physics or mathematics.

You already use hermeneutics all the time. You use hermeneutics when you talk to your friends, when you read a news article, when you watch a movie… in fact, you are doing it right now as you read this foreword. Any time that you have any sort of communication, you use hermeneutics to understand what is being communicated.

The other day my wife told me to take out the trash, so I said something to the effect of, "Oh, yes dear, but you see, I have already taken out the trash. When I came to Christ, He took all of my sin—my *spiritual garbage*—and did away with it. I have trusted in Him for eternal life and though I may die, I shall live forever on the new earth!" to which my wife said, "Right… Now take out the trash!" So, I took out the trash. The first time she told me to take out the trash, I spiritualized her words (obviously in jest). The result may have been a beautiful analogy about spiritual garbage, but in the end, my interpretation was just that—spiritual garbage. The second time, I used proper hermeneutics and accepted what she told me to do. So it is with Bible study. Instead of forcing spiritual garbage into the Bible, we want to accept what the Bible says and live accordingly.

Hermeneutics for Everyone: A Practical Guide for Reading and Studying Your Bible is written as a manual on biblical hermeneutics to help you find in any given passage the single, fixed, plain, meaning that God and the human authors expressed in the text. By sticking to the plain meaning of the text, you will avoid getting into the spiritual garbage of bad interpretation and instead, you will pull from the Bible a better understanding of who God is and what He expects you to do.

My friend, Dr. Daniel Goepfrich, is the author of this book. He loves God, so naturally he loves reading what God wrote. He has several years of experience as a pastor with countless hours of preparation of expository sermons. He is the author of several books and he is an international speaker and teacher. He is passionate about

helping people around the world understand the Bible. He is thoroughly equipped and experienced to write this manual on biblical hermeneutics.

Here is another fun theology word to impress your friends: *perspicuity*. The doctrine of perspicuity speaks of the clarity of the Bible. When we say that the Bible is perspicuous, we mean that it does not take a Ph.D. to understand the central message of the Bible. This does not necessarily mean that every bit and detail in the Bible is equally easy to understand but that everyone is capable of getting a grasp on what the Bible means. Daniel's ministry is called Theology is for Everyone, which is a brilliant summary of what he does: he makes theology accessible to everyone. This book, *Hermeneutics for Everyone*, follows in the same vein: since the Bible can be understood by everyone, there should be a hermeneutics textbook for everyone.

A few years ago, Daniel and I got together with several others and formed an organization called the International Society for Biblical Hermeneutics (ISBH) to promote sound biblical hermeneutics around the world. We do webinars, symposiums, paper presentations, and all sorts of nerdy stuff. We have written about soteriology, eschatology, missiology, and other "-ologies," but we did not yet have a hermeneutics book. I was thrilled when Daniel said that he was writing a hermeneutics book—first of all, because it is Daniel so I already knew it was going to be excellent work—but also because hermeneutics is the thrust of what ISBH is doing. We are thrilled to have a book published by ISBH that deals with hermeneutics and Bible study methods. If you would like to learn more about ISBH, please feel free to check out the website at www.BiblicalHermeneutics.org.

We hope that you will find this book to be beneficial to your spiritual growth. I pray that using the biblical hermeneutics methods in this book will help you to grow in your walk as a Christian and that you will be equipped for every good work (2 Tim 3:17).

Paul Miles
Executive Director, Grace Abroad Ministries
Founding Member, International Society for Biblical Hermeneutics
December 12, 2023

Introduction

According to the apostle Paul, God has very specific goals for every believer: 1) we are to become conformed to the image of Christ (Rom 8:29); 2) we are to do good works (Eph 2:10); and 3) we are to build up the Body of Christ by helping other believers grow (Eph 4:12). A quick look at any bookstore website reveals that there are numerous books, courses, and study guides that offer to help churches, Sunday School classes, and small groups accomplish these things. However, tucked away in a personal letter to a dear friend and ministry partner, the same apostle gave a startling piece of information—the Scriptures are the only tool we need to accomplish all of them.

> "Every scripture is inspired by God and useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the person dedicated to God may be capable and equipped for every good work." (2 Tim 3:16–17)

If this is true—and nearly everyone who is reading this book believes, at some level, that it is—then we find a mandate for the Bible to be read, studied, taught, and applied regularly, carefully, and accurately. Just one chapter earlier, Paul told Timothy that this teaching should be generational: "What you heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful people who will be competent to teach others as well." (2 Tim 2:2) To the Ephesians, Paul wrote that the gifted leaders that Jesus placed in his church were to use the Scriptures to help God's people become equipped for ministry: "He himself gave some as apostles, some as prophets, some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, that is, to build up the body of Christ" (Eph 4:11–12).

However, this line of thinking is often taken too far. Many Christians attend their weekly church services or Bible studies so they can "be fed." They assume that the pastor's job is to "feed the sheep." After all, the pastor was the one who went to Bible college or seminary. He is the one who spends time in his study preparing these

lessons. He owns a library of reference books, original language works, and commentaries to help him parse through the things that no regular Christian can. Right? Is not the flock put in the pastor's charge for this reason (1 Pet 5:1–4)? Is the congregation not reliant on his teaching?

In short, ***no!*** This is exactly the opposite of what should be happening in our churches. While is it true that not everyone should have a formal teaching position (Jam 3:1) and that certain local church elders will focus on instruction and doctrinal issues more than others (1 Tim 5:17), every Christian has the right and responsibility to study the Bible and teach those around them (Col 3:16). Older saints are to mentor and teach the younger saints how to live the truth of God's instructions (Titus 2:1–7). The pastors cannot do all the work.

Every Christian is meant to build up others. Thus, every Christian should be taught and well-versed in the process of carefully interpreting the Scriptures, so they can fulfill their ministry in their families, local churches, and anywhere they go in this physical and internet-connected world. This book, then, is not meant to serve only as a training manual, a practical guide to help you do that, but it is also a call for every Christian to understand and make a habit of strong Bible study practices for themselves and those they are discipling.

Features of this book

Many people just don't know how to study the Bible well. It's not that they don't want to. They do; they often simply don't know how. Of course, Bible colleges and seminaries offer these classes, but most Christians have no intention of going to Bible college. And let's be honest—schools like that tend to get very technical and seem overwhelming. I hope this book can cut through the fog, offering a balance of presenting both sound theology and a practical method to help you get there on your own.

To accomplish that, this book was designed with three goals in mind. First, I want it to be a solid teaching and reference resource that you can use for years to come. Second, I want it to be useful for people at all levels of Christian maturity and usable

from middle school through adulthood. Third, I want it to be very practical and hands-on, not just theoretical.

To help accomplish these goals, you'll notice some specific features built into the book.

Wide margins

Beginning with chapter one, you'll notice that there is a wide outside margin. This is to provide you extra space to take notes and add your own highlights and comments. If you are using the book in a classroom or small group, this feature can help with your group discussion.

"Do it Yourself" sections

This book would not be a helpful "Practical Guide" if it did not provide a way to put it into practice. Throughout the chapters, I have included workbook-style sections with exercises and examples to give you hands-on experience with the topic or concept I just presented. As your study continues, these will also build on previous exercises.

Again, these exercises can be used for classroom homework or small group discussion. They can be done individually before the group meets or worked together as a group or both.

Glossary

As you might expect, there are many terms we will use that you may or may not already know. If we are going to be precise, we must make sure we accurately define those terms. So, throughout the book, you will see words and phrases highlighted in bold and followed by an asterisk (**example***). These are all listed with a short definition in the "Glossary" (starting on page 181) with the page number of their explanation in the book. This should provide a great way for you to look up a word for both quick reference and more detail.

Select Bibliography

This is certainly not the only book on this topic, and finding trustworthy study resources as I will describe can be difficult. At the end of the book, I have included a short bibliography of books that you may find useful. They are listed in categories so you can come back and refer to them quickly when looking for a resource in a specific area.

Website

Finally, there is a section of my website dedicated to this book and topic. There you will find access to a full video course to complement the book, along with some FAQs and short videos that give more examples and further discussion to help you think through various concepts. Teachers using this as a class text may choose to assign these videos to their students as follow-up or additional projects.

Registration on the website is always free and other free and premium courses are available as well. Scan the QR code to find out more or visit the book's website at theologyisforeveryone.com/bible-study. For further discussion or to ask specific questions about a passage or topic, you can contact me at theologyisforeveryone.com.

Many people contributed to this book with their questions, suggestions, and insights, but I owe a great deal of gratitude to my wife, Saralynn, for her involvement in helping prepare this book. Her input is always invaluable in bringing clarity and corrections that I would have otherwise missed.

I appreciate Paul Miles at ISBH both for writing the Foreword and for heading the publication process. I pray this will be a versatile tool in the hands of God's people everywhere.

PART ONE

1

Let me introduce your Bible

Before we get into the steps of how to study the Bible, I believe it is essential that we have a correct understanding of what the Bible is, where it came from, and what it offers us. A correct view of the Bible will provide the strong foundation on which we will build the framework of careful Bible study. These first four chapters intend to create that framework.

What is the Bible?

Do we really need an introduction to the Bible? Doesn't everyone know what the Bible is? Maybe they do, so that means it's a good time for a pop quiz. Here are ten quiz questions that you might find in a Bible college introductory class. See how many you can answer without looking them up or talking with anyone else. The answers are given at the end of this chapter (but no peeking!).

1. Who wrote the book of Acts?
2. What is the last book of the Old Testament?
3. How many years did it take to write the Bible from Genesis to Revelation?
4. Who said, "He must become more important while I become less important"?
5. In which book of the Bible do twelve men explore the land of Canaan?
6. How many different human writers (approximately) did God use to compose the Bible?
7. Who said, "I know that my Redeemer lives" and "in my flesh I will see God"?

8. What is the word normally used to describe that there is one God who exists in three persons?
9. Where in the Old Testament would you find the words, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"
10. Finish this proverb: "Pride goes before _____."

Why do these questions matter? Is Bible "trivia" useful in any way? I believe it is but maybe not for the reason you might think. For some, the purpose of knowing trivia is simply to show off their knowledge. They can answer all the questions and recite all the Bible verses. For them, these things truly are "trivial"—of little importance. They treat them as facts to memorize rather than truths to embrace. I know; I used to be that person, the epitome of Paul's warning to the immature Corinthian believers that "knowledge puffs up" (1 Cor 8:1).

But there is a much more important reason to know these so-called "trivia" facts—God put them in the Bible. As we will see over the next two chapters, God intentionally chose which parts of human history and knowledge he wanted to record and preserve for us, and because this collection of writings that we call "the Bible" is such a small subset of everything that humans have lived and discovered, it makes sense that we should know best those few things that God codified. In other words, out of the vast information available to us, these are the things God wants us to know. So, yes, they are important, and, while possibly "trivia," they are certainly not "trivial."

So, what is the Bible? Simply put, it is a portable library, a collection of writings intended to help us come to know God himself and his plan for this world and its people. There are at least four key points that every student of the Bible should know about how this fascinating collection came about.

Divisions

Most Bibles have two main divisions called the Old and New Testaments. The Old Testament contains the record of how everything started and God's selection of the nation of Israel, and it ends with Israel back in her homeland

after being exiled for 70 years. Malachi was the last known prophet from God for about 400 years, so it makes sense to put a major break there.

The New Testament begins with the birth and life of Jesus and contains historical information about the first several decades of the church. It concludes with God's explanation of what will happen at the end of time and some details about eternity.

That said, the names "Old Testament" and "New Testament" are not entirely accurate and can even cause theological confusion. The word "testament" is synonymous with "covenant" (it's the same word in Greek), so by swapping the terms, we are calling the two Bible divisions "Old Covenant" and "New Covenant." The problem is that these two covenants are for Israel only, not the entire world. The Old Covenant did not begin until Exodus 20 and did not end until Jesus' death on the cross, so not only does it not span the entire "Old Testament," but it also covers the first four books of the "New Testament." Along the same lines, God promised that he would make a New Covenant with Israel after he established them back in their land during Messiah's kingdom (Jer 31:31–34). This has not happened yet, so God's New Covenant is not yet in effect.[1]

While it will probably never catch on, a better way to understand the divisions of the Bible would be something like "Parts 1 and 2" or even the "Hebrew Scriptures" and "Greek Scriptures." Simply because of common usage, I will continue to use "Old Testament" (OT) and "New Testament" (NT) throughout this book (but under protest).

Timing and Locations

The oldest book in the Bible is probably Job. Based on some details in his book, he was likely a contemporary of Abraham around 2000 BC, about 500

[1] There are many good scholars who do not understand the New Covenant in this way, but it is the natural reading of the text, the method that this book is going to present.

years before Moses was born.[2] We assume that his book was written about that time, but we cannot be sure of that.

The first books that we can accurately date are the Pentateuch—the five books of Moses and first books of the Old Testament. Moses wrote these during the years that he led the nation of Israel in the wilderness between Egypt and Canaan. This was 1445–1405 BC.

The final books of the New Testament were John's writings: his gospel, the three letters (1–3 John), and the Revelation. We know that John recorded the Revelation while he was exiled on Patmos around AD 96 (Rev 1:9–11). Using these dates for Moses and John, we can say that the Bible was written over approximately 1550 years, plus possibly more for Job.

As you can imagine, most of these writers did not live at the same time and never knew each other. Yet they believed the accuracy of the writings that came before them, and their own writings never contradicted or corrected any previous parts of Scripture.

Although many books have their writer's name attached to them, some do not, so it is impossible to determine exactly how many people God used to create the Bible. The best estimate is approximately 40 different writers. Although it is often assumed that Luke was a Gentile, it is best to understand that God had only Jewish men write the Bible.[3] Of these 40 men, some were educated by some of the best systems of their day (Moses, Daniel, Paul), other were uneducated (Amos, Peter), and they came from a variety of trades and family backgrounds.

While these men lived and ministered primarily in the land of Israel, the Bible was actually produced on three continents—Asia (including the Middle

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[2] For more information about the individual books of the Bible, see my three-volume *Chapter by Chapter* series of commentaries (theologyisforeveryone.com/books).

[3] Paul seems to include Luke with other Gentile fellow workers in Col 4:10–11, 14. However, in Rom 3:3, Paul was clear that God gave his word through the Jewish people. By content, Luke wrote more in his two books (Luke and Acts) than any other NT writer. If Luke were a Gentile, this would make Paul's statement in Romans 3 factually wrong.

East), Europe (much of the New Testament), and Africa (some selections within the Old Testament). It is truly a book for the world.

Languages

Covering more than 1500 years and working from multiple locations thousands of miles apart, you might think that those men must have written in several different languages, but that is surprisingly not the case. In fact, over all that time, the majority of the original words of the Bible were written in only two languages: Hebrew and Greek. To be sure, as languages do, Hebrew changed and evolved during that time, and those differences are reflected in different books of the Old Testament. Additionally, two long passages (Dan 2:4–7:28; Ezra 4:8–6:18 and 7:12–26) plus a few other individual verses used Aramaic, an ancient Semitic language similar to Hebrew.[4]

What makes the use of these two languages both interesting and important is that they were the common languages of the intended audience. The people of Israel were the primary recipients of the Old Testament, so God had the prophets and poets speak and write in ancient Hebrew, their ordinary language. They readily understood the idioms, figures of speech, and nuances because they spoke the language every day.

For about 600 years (around 300 BC to AD 300), the Greek language of the ancient philosophers became diluted or "dumbed down." Alexander the Great quickly took over the known world and brought his illustrious language with him. As Greek spread across these other lands, the vocabulary, syntax, and pronunciation became less complex and easier to learn as it mixed with other languages. This created a new form of Greek called **Koine Greek*** *Koine* (usually pronounced *koi'-nay*) is a Greek word that means "common."[5] Koine Greek quickly became the common language of commerce and business because

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[4] This is the language that some translations call "Babylonian" or "Chaldean" in Dan 1:4.

[5] *koinē* has the same root as the word *koinonia* which is often translated in the NT as "communion, fellowship, sharing," i.e., having things in common.

merchants could now do business with people with whom they could not converse previously.

This also meant that literature written in Koine Greek could be read and understood across the entire empire. When Rome overthrew the Grecian empire, Koine Greek remained the language of the people while Latin was relegated primarily to politics. So, in every area of the Roman Empire, you would be likely to encounter at least three languages at any given time—Greek, Latin, and the common language(s) and dialects of the native people. This explains why the charge against Jesus, posted above his head on the cross, "was written in Aramaic, Latin, and Greek" (John 19:20).

One more point worth noting here, that we will expand on in chapter three, is the reminder that the Bible was originally written in the language of the common people so they could easily understand it. As we discuss in Bible translations and translation philosophy later, we must assume that if God wanted the Bible in common languages back then, he certainly wants it in the common languages of people today.

Literature/Genre

As I mentioned above, the Bible is not as much a book as it is a collection of writings. While we often call these writings "books of the Bible," that is a generic (but not always accurate) term describing what forms this small library. There are four main types of literature that we find in the Bible.

Historical narrative

These are the writings that most resemble what we would call "books." Historical narrative is a type of literature designed to accurately record what happened in the past (as opposed to historical fiction which simply uses history as a basis for a good story). Of the 66 books in the Bible, 22 are classified as historical narrative (although they may contain small sections of other types). This means they should be read and accepted as factual. These books

are the first seventeen of the Old Testament (Genesis through Esther) and the first five of the New Testament (Matthew through Acts).

Wisdom / Poetry

The five books of the Old Testament following Esther—Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs—are often called the books of wisdom because of the information they contain about God and life. While Job begins and ends as a historical narrative, the majority of the book is written in Hebrew poetry, more like a drama than a simple historical record. Song of Songs also follows a more dramatic style, and you could imagine it being acted out on stage by two main characters, a narrator, and a chorus of girls which the woman frequently addresses.

Unlike traditional English poetry, Hebrew poetry is not based on rhyme or even rhythm. Instead, it relies on **parallelism***, a method in which two lines work together to make a point. Sometimes the two lines repeat the same information in different ways. Sometimes they oppose each other. But in every case, the two lines work together to form one thought. The Psalms is a five-volume collection of songs written in this style, each psalm usually being self-contained. Proverbs, on the other hand, can jump from one topic to another in every verse, but each verse typically follows the two-line pattern. Ecclesiastes is a mix of the two with chapters or paragraphs of two-line thoughts and saying linked together.

Although it is truly a letter, the NT book of James is closely modeled after the OT wisdom books and has many similarities to Proverbs. In the OT, Jeremiah wrote Lamentations completely in poetic form, and small sections of poetry are found in many other Bible books as well, especially the OT prophets.[6]

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[6] One unusual example of Hebrew poetry is in Gen 1:27 which uses three lines instead of just two. This is significant for many reasons that I go into in *Old Testament Chapter by Chapter, Volume 1* and most other good commentaries address as well.

Letter / Epistle

Not strictly a "book," a letter or epistle[7] was a personal communication from one person to another person or group. We see short examples of these within the historical books of the OT, but the best-known letters are in the NT, where 21 of the 27 writings are in this style. The apostle Paul wrote thirteen of these—nine to churches (Romans through Thessalonians) and four to individuals (Timothy, Titus, and Philemon). The other eight letters (usually called the "General Epistles") came from five different writers—two apostles (Peter and John), two of Jesus' half-brothers (James and Jude), and the unknown-to-us writer of Hebrews.[8]

Technically, the Revelation is also a letter because Jesus dictated chapters two and three and commissioned John to send them to seven different local churches in eastern Turkey. However, the Revelation is called a "prophecy" in Rev 1:3, so it best fits in the final category.

Prophecy

While some people prefer to use the term "apocalyptic" to refer to these writings, that is not a good term. First, although it's true that the Greek word *apokalypsis* (ἀποκαλύψις) means "revealed, revelation," the English word tends to focus on destruction or disaster ("an apocalyptic event") or simply the end of the world ("the Apocalypse"). While prophetic literature may include those elements, it is short-sighted to say that is all these books contain.

In the Bible, prophecy did not necessarily have to do with telling the future; in fact, that is a small part of what the prophets did. Instead, prophecy was based on receiving a direct revelation or message from God that the prophet was to relay to one or more persons. Most of the time, these prophetic messages

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[7] An epistle is often considered more formal and authoritative than a simple letter, but that may be a modern distinction that the apostles did not necessarily intend to make as they were writing. The Greek word is *epistolē* (ἐπιστολή).

[8] Many people have traditionally assumed that Paul wrote Hebrews, but that is unlikely for several reasons. I go into more detail about the authorship of Hebrews in *New Testament Chapter by Chapter*.

were warnings about what would happen if their audience did not turn back to God, but even then, many of those consequences and punishments had been told centuries earlier. The prophets often did not give new information, only new warnings. The key, however, is that their message came directly from God himself.

This sets the prophetic section apart from the other three categories. As we will see in the next chapter, although God inspired and supervised the writing of every word in the Bible, he did not dictate every word. Most of the other three types of literature were the result of God's work in the human author. They were David's songs, Paul's letters, and Matthew's eyewitness testimony. Prophecy, on the other hand, was not from within the human but rather directly from God. This is why we so often find a phrase like, "This is what the Lord God of Israel says…"

In some cases, these direct messages did include information about the future. The second half of Daniel outlines the coming world ruler that John saw in much more detail beginning with Revelation 12. Isaiah and Zechariah both told of events from Jesus' first coming (including his crucifixion) as well as his second coming that is still future. And the Revelation, of course, provides a great deal of information about the time that we have not yet reached, even extending to details about our existence in eternity future. We could know none of these things had God not revealed them for the specific purpose of making sure they were written and preserved for generations to come.

Summary

I opened this chapter by asking "what is the Bible," and I hope that no matter how much you already knew about it a few pages ago, you have grown in your appreciation for this incomparable book.

The challenge I have given students for many years now is that "right living requires right learning," and that means knowing the Bible inside and out. No detail is too small or too trivial. You may never memorize the entire

thing, and I'm not sure that you need to, but the better you know how to read and study the Bible, the better your life and ministry will be as you choose to live out what you are learning.

Answers to the questions from the beginning of the chapter

1. **Who wrote the book of Acts?**
   Luke wrote the gospel of Luke and Acts (Luke 1:1–4; Acts 1:1)

2. **What is the last book of the Old Testament?**
   This is a trick question. In English Bibles, the last book is Malachi. In the Hebrew Bible, the last book is Chronicles (1 and 2 Chronicles combined into one volume).

3. **How many years did it take to write the Bible from Genesis to Revelation?**
   Approximately 1500–1600 years (1440 BC to AD 100)

4. **Who said, "He must become more important while I become less important"?**
   John the Baptizer referring to Jesus (John 3:30)

5. **In which book of the Bible do twelve men explore the land of Canaan?**
   Numbers 13

6. **How many different human writers (approximately) did God use to compose the Bible?**
   Approximately 40 different people wrote the Bible

7. **Who said, "I know that my Redeemer lives" and "in my flesh I will see God"?**
   Job (Job 19:25–26)

8. **What is the word normally used to describe that there is one God who exists in three persons?**
   Trinity; though this word never occurs in the Bible, it is an accurate description of the doctrine that is found throughout

9. **Where in the Old Testament would you find the words, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"**
   Psalm 22:1

10. **Finish this proverb: "Pride goes before _____."**
    "destruction"; the rest of the verse states "and a haughty spirit before a fall" (Prov 16:18)

2

Inspiration: The basis for Bible study

The doctrine of the **inspiration*** of the Scriptures is undoubtedly one of the most underrated Christian doctrines. Week after week Christians attend church services where announcements are given, songs are sung, and a sermon is preached. For many, this may be the only time they will hear or see the Scriptures all week. Maybe. If the Bible is even used in their churches.

The fact that many local churches no longer use or teach from the Scriptures is bad enough. The fact that these churches are still open, with people faithfully attending and giving their time and money, is even worse.

Why is it such a big deal that Christians do not read their Bibles often or at all? Inspiration.

If "inspiration" were to arise in a typical conversation, people would assume one of two meanings, depending on who is in the crowd. If the people were medically inclined, they might think, "The drawing of air into the lungs."[1] Nearly everyone else would think, "The action or power of moving the intellect or emotions; the act of influencing or suggesting opinions."[2] (Although not likely in those exact words.)

However, in theology, inspiration takes on a whole new meaning. It is no longer limited to a mammal's method of getting oxygen or an artist's source of creativity. In fact, those are no comparison at all. Theologically speaking, inspiration is one of the greatest miracles ever accomplished—it is how God chose to create and deliver his word, the Bible.

Inspiration gives us the reason to study the Bible, so it is worth taking a chapter to make sure we understand as much as we can about this miracle. In order to do this well, we must answer at least four questions about inspiration.

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[1] https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/inspiration; meaning #3 (accessed 6/29/2023).

[2] Ibid; meaning #4.

The first two questions deal with the **nature** of inspiration: *What is inspiration?* and *How far does it extend?* The third question, Why do we need it? or *Why is it important?* addresses the **purpose** of inspiration. Finally, the **benefit** of inspiration answers *What do we gain from inspiration?*

The Nature of Inspiration

The nature of inspiration deals with its definition and extent. These lay the foundation for everything important for us to know about this fascinating miracle. Stated briefly, inspiration has to do with the source of the Scriptures.

What is inspiration?

Two main passages within Scripture itself point to its source. Each was written by one of the two leading apostles, Peter to the Jews and Paul to the Gentiles, as part of their final words to their followers before they were martyred for their faith.

Paul wrote, "Every scripture is inspired by God and useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness…" (2 Tim 3:16). Peter wrote that "…no prophecy was ever borne of human impulse; rather, men carried along by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" (2 Pet 1:21).

My favorite definition of inspiration comes from the 20th-century scholar, Dr. Charles Ryrie. Yes, it is a little long, but it is also comprehensive.

> [Inspiration] is God's superintendence of the human authors so that, using their own individual personalities, they composed and recorded without error His revelation to man in the words of the original autographs.[3]

Each phrase is so packed with meaning that it would require several chapters to explain all the nuances involved. Due to some overlap within them, I will broadly summarize each phrase with a short examination of one or more

[3] Charles C. Ryrie, *A Survey of Bible Doctrine* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972), 38.

key points. First, he said that inspiration is "God's superintendence of the human authors." The key here is "God's superintendence." To superintend means "to have or exercise the charge and oversight of" something.[4] The first major truth about inspiration is that the entire process took place under God's personal direction and care. This makes three statements, two negative and one positive, that the Scriptures, as we will define them, 1) were not the total result of the human mind, 2) were not produced haphazardly without any direction, but 3) were completed by a careful process under God's direct supervision.

Second, we find that God's supervision of these writings did not overshadow or eliminate the writers' "individual personalities," including their languages, passions, experiences, and knowledge. This leads us to the important fact of the dual authorship of the Scriptures.

When Paul wrote that "every scripture is inspired by God," he did not mean to convey that it was a supernatural work only, as if they were dictated word-for-word. One look at Paul's writings proves that he did not even necessarily consider himself to be writing Scripture. In response to the Corinthians' question about marriage, Paul refused to contradict Christ's teaching: "To the married I give this command—not I, but the Lord…" (1 Cor 7:10). However, he did not hesitate at all to give instruction beyond what Jesus had said, and he did so in two formats: command and opinion. "To the rest I say—I, not the Lord…" (7:12) is a direct command from Paul's apostolic authority. At the end of the chapter, he simply gave his opinion: "But in my opinion, she will be happier if she remains as she is—and I think that I too have the Spirit of God!" (7:40).

The point is that Paul, with no idea that Christians would be reading his letter two thousand years later, gave instruction, command, and opinion to a specific group of believers of his time. Though God oversaw that writing and

[4] https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/superintend (accessed 6/29/2023).

guided what Paul wrote, it is obvious that it was not a direct dictation but a personal letter full of Paul's own wisdom, experience, and passion.

Chafer made an interesting and important observation about the writers' knowledge of science, history, mathematics, culture, etc. at the time of their writing.

> With reference to mundane things, these writers were not permitted to go beyond the intelligence of the men of their day by anticipating later scientific discoveries, nor to express themselves within those restrictions in such a manner as would develop later absurdities when their writings would be compared with the later development of knowledge, which development was predicted (Dan. 12:4).[5]

In other words, inspiration did not allow them to know more than they should know at their time in history yet protected them from writing something that would later be proven incorrect.

Along that same line, in Ryrie's definition we see that these writers both "composed and recorded," indicating that some of their writing was original to themselves while other parts were simply transcribed dictation. Unlike Paul's letters, many parts of Scripture are indeed God's own words, not the writers' at all. The Old Testament is full of examples, as we find the phrase "thus saith the LORD" more than 400 times in the *King James Version* from Exodus to Malachi, nearly 350 of them in the prophetic books (Isaiah through Malachi) and 52 from other prophets in all six of the books of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles.

While the occurrences are fewer in the New Testament, they are not completely absent. As the Holy Spirit worked in their memories (John 14:26), the Gospel writers were able to transcribe some of the very words that Jesus said during their time with him. The narrative passages of Acts were admittedly not Luke's own creation, though he spent a great deal of time putting

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[5] Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, Eight volumes in four (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1993) I:115.

together the accounts of many eyewitnesses (Luke 1:1–4; Acts 1:1–2). The longest, non-narrative example of dictation in the New Testament is a series of personal letters that Christ told John to put on paper and send to the churches listed in Revelation 2–3. Seven times Jesus commanded John, "To the angel of the church in [city name], write the following…" While other parts of the Revelation were John's observations, these two chapters must be read as nothing less than direct dictation from the Savior himself.

The next part of Ryrie's definition states that this composition and recording was done "without error" and comprised God's "revelation to man." These are both essential ingredients in properly understanding the nature of inspiration.

One of the most common arguments against the credibility and authority of the Scriptures comes in the form of this question: "How can we trust the Bible since it was written by people?" If we accept the premise as stated, this question is extremely valid. However, a false premise can lead only to a false conclusion. The premise of the question is not, "People can be wrong." We would agree to that with no debate at all. The question, though, is based on the error that "The Bible is the product of people alone." It is here that we disagree. If the Scriptures were produced by humans alone, they would have no more authority than the daily newspaper or your favorite blog or opinion column. The Bible would require a corrections box and a disclaimer that "The opinions expressed here are the individual writer's alone and may not accurately reflect the opinions of the other writers in this collection of books."

The doctrine of inspiration contends that, since whatever was written down was done so under God's personal supervision, it is impossible for there to be any error in the Scriptures at all. To find an error would be to find a place where either God was not paying attention or God was wrong. If God did not supervise a section, then he is a liar because he said that the men were "carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Pet 1:21). If God were wrong on a section, then he is neither omniscient nor perfect, and still a liar, because he claimed both of those characteristics for himself. Any genuine error found in the Scriptures would nullify their authority and bring all of Christianity to a crashing halt

because the God of the Bible would be found to be a false god. This is why there is no area of Systematic Theology (other than possibly Christology, the doctrine about Jesus) that is attacked more ferociously than the doctrine of the Scriptures. Untrustworthy Scriptures = no truth = no Christianity.

The reason for this is also found in this section of Ryrie's definition. The Scriptures are not only "without error," but they are God's "revelation to man." To believe that humans could ever come up with the information and arrive at the conclusions found in Scripture is completely implausible. The greatest minds in the history of our world have disagreed on nearly every point of philosophy, science, math, and geography—let alone theology. To claim that this collection of 66 writings—composed over 1,500 years on three continents in three languages by more than 40 different writers of varying backgrounds, experiences, and levels of intellect—could come about through the ever-changing mind of man would be to claim the greatest conspiracy of all time! No mathematician, logician, or philosopher would give it more than a passing, uninterested glance.

The reason this book has withstood every imaginable attack and test is that it is God's revelation—God's own message—not man's research. Given by God, supervised by God, and carrying the weight of God's own character, the Scriptures are truly God's work, even though he used humans to produce them.

How far does inspiration extend?

Finally, according to Ryrie, all this was put down "in the words of the original autographs."[6] This tells us what is and is not included under the scope of inspiration. The question of scope is the basis for much of the division within Christianity and between Christians and cults. What, exactly, was inspired by God?

While most cults accept the Bible, or at least parts of it, as God's truth (in some fashion), they all have additional books or collected information that

[6] We will explore what Ryrie meant by "autographs" in chapter three.

they believe to have as much as or even more authority than the Bible. The *Book of Mormon* is just one example. In Roman Catholicism, their *Catechism* clearly places the Bible alongside Sacred Tradition and the Magisterium as a sort of inspired trinity.

> The task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God, whether in its written form or in the form of Tradition, has been entrusted to the living, teaching office of the Church alone.[7]

> It is clear therefore that, in the supremely wise arrangement of God, sacred Tradition, Sacred Scripture, and the Magisterium of the Church are so connected and associated that one of them cannot stand without the others.[8]

In both of these quotes, the Catholic Church insists that inspiration extends to both the written Scriptures and to whatever Tradition (including both oral tradition and practice) the teaching authority of the Church holds as authoritative. Though the Church cannot and will not admit it, this is a highly subjective view of inspiration. They rely on their own Sacred Tradition to give them the authority to determine what is authoritative.

Fortunately, we do not have to jump through these hoops. While the Scriptures themselves insist on their own inspiration, we are not limited to interpretive arguments to come to that conclusion. In fact, one simple word gives us everything we need to determine inspiration's extent: "Scripture."

> The word translated "Scripture" comes from the Greek word *graphe*, which simply means "writing." … The "writings" of the Old Testament were eventually collected into three groups called the Law, Prophets, and Writings (or Psalms), and constituted the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament. …

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[7] *Catechism of the Catholic Church, Second Edition* (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1997), §85.

[8] Ibid, §95.

> In the New Testament the Greek verb *grapho* is used about ninety times in reference to the Bible, while the noun form *graphe* is used fifty-one times in the New Testament, almost exclusively of the Holy Scriptures.[9]

This simple word provides the two keys we need to understand how limited in scope the process of inspiration truly was. First, "Scripture" properly applies only to what was written down. John said that "Jesus performed many other miraculous signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not recorded in this book" (John 20:30). The fact that Jesus or the apostles did something or said something does not place those sayings or actions within the scope of inspiration. Now, one could argue that everything Jesus said was inspired since he is God, and we would agree with that in principle. Taken to its logical conclusion, though, that would have to include every snore, burp, or hiccup Jesus produced as well, and that's just silly. We are asking what has authority as being God's revelation to humanity, and the fact that it is always called "Scripture" disqualifies any oral tradition or practices that were not intentionally written down under God's direction.

This also shows that the writers themselves were not inspired. We often hear of someone "being inspired" to write something or create a piece of art. The doctrine of inspiration makes it clear that the writers were not inspired; the writings themselves were. The apostles wrote many other things that did not carry the same authority as those which God chose to keep for us through the centuries.

Second, "Scripture" refers to the writings only in their original work because those were the words that were actually written. Inspiration applies to the original Hebrew and Aramaic of the Old Testament and the Koine Greek of the New Testament, nothing else. This means that—despite what many people and churches want to believe—copies of the original and translations of the original are not inspired. The English Bibles we carry are most certainly

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[9] Paul Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology: Revised and Expanded* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2008), 155.

God's word, but they are translations of the inspired works that God supervised. We will address that in the next chapter.

The terminology used to clarify the extent of inspiration is "verbal-plenary." By "verbal" we mean that the very words themselves were inspired, not the people and not just the concepts behind the words. By "plenary" we mean that inspiration extends to every part of the Scriptures, not just those dealing with faith. Thus, even though the Bible was not written to be a textbook of science, history, or mathematics, when those topics (and all others) are addressed, they have the same authority as passages about faith and doctrine.

So how can we define the nature of inspiration and its extent? Chafer gave us probably the best and most succinct of all definitions, combining all the truths above, when he wrote, "In the original writings, the Spirit guided in the choice of the words used."[10]

The Purpose of Inspiration

Now that we have a clearer understanding of what inspiration is and what are its limits, we have the basis upon which to answer our other two questions: *Why is inspiration important?* and *What do we gain from it?* The answers are the simple conclusions drawn from what we have already learned. Here is Ryrie's definition again:

> [Inspiration] is God's superintendence of the human authors so that, using their own individual personalities, they composed and recorded without error His revelation to man in the words of the original autographs.

Based on our understanding of inspiration, the level of importance is almost immeasurable because it deals with God's revelation of himself and his works. God's purpose in producing this specific set of writings was to make known to humanity things that we could not otherwise know.

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[10] Chafer, I:71.

One example of this is found in the last book of the Bible, simply called "The Revelation." John introduced important but otherwise unknowable information by writing, "The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must happen very soon" (1:1). Without the direct action of God's revelation shown to John and recorded by him, we could not possibly have known what is yet to come.

Why do we need inspiration? What is its purpose? Enns states, "Inspiration is necessary to preserve the revelation of God. If God has revealed Himself but the record of that revelation is not accurately recorded, then the revelation of God is subject to question. Hence, inspiration guarantees the accuracy of the revelation."[11]

The Benefit of Inspiration

So, what do we gain from inspiration? What benefit would we not have if the Scriptures were not "inspired" in this way? Authority.

We live in a world of subjectivity. Postmodernism demands that there is no absolute truth, that "truth" is pliable and personal, and even that contradictory beliefs are equally valid. Under this philosophy, there can be no authority. Who is to say that something is right or wrong? How do laws and justice function where there is no common set of beliefs or values that are accepted by all? Authority demands objectivity, and inspiration provides that in the Scriptures.

How do we dare tell a person that he or she is a sinner condemned under God's wrath? The authority of Scripture. How can we make the humanly illogical claim that the death of a Jew nearly 2,000 years ago can remove that wrath from upon us? The authority of Scripture. How are we able to point out errors in doctrine and practice while celebrating common beliefs within a community of faith? The authority of Scripture.

Because the Scriptures were given by God himself, written down under his personal supervision, and preserved for our reading and understanding, we can be certain that they are an unshakable foundation upon which we can

[11] Enns, 161.

build our lives and under which we can find shelter from everything that fights against it. That is why we must learn to handle them carefully and properly in our study, and then obey them faithfully.

3

Choosing your Bible translations

If the term for how God gave us the Bible is *inspiration*, the term we might use for how and why we still have it after thousands of years would be **preservation***. We believe that not only does the Bible exist because of a miracle from God, but that he also miraculously preserved it throughout the centuries—using various methods of both copying and translating into different languages—so we can be sure that we have his word even today.

In chapter one we learned that the Bible was not written in English or any of our modern languages. God chose to inspire the Scriptures in the common language of the original audiences—Hebrew and Aramaic for ancient Israel (Old Testament) and Koine Greek for the Gentile world under the Roman Empire (New Testament). These original writings are called **autographs***. Throughout the centuries they were copied dozens of times, and those copies were copied, and so on. For just the New Testament, we have more than five thousand of these copies (called **manuscripts***) in Greek. That doesn't include more than 20,000 copies of the New Testament translated from Greek into other ancient languages (such as Aramaic, Ethiopian, Egyptian, Latin, and more)! To say that God has preserved his word carefully over all this time is an understatement. The problem is that those are all ancient languages, and most people can't use them. So, what can we do? Just like the original audiences, we need Bibles in our own native languages.

Anyone who has learned or worked in multiple languages knows that there is no way to perfectly move from one language to another without adjusting or changing some things. Maybe the word order is different. Maybe the **receptor language*** (the language being translated *into*) does not have a word that exactly matches the original word. Or maybe several words could work, depending on the nuance of the original text. All these things must be

taken into consideration when *making* a translation, and so we must also consider them when *choosing* our translations for study.

Let's look at an example of how this works in practice. Compare these popular translations of Matthew 1:18 describing Mary's miraculous pregnancy with Jesus. (A list of the translation abbreviations is at the beginning of the book following the Table of Contents.)

"she was found to be **pregnant** through the Holy Spirit" (NET)
"she was found to be **with child** by the Holy Spirit" (NASB 1995)
"she was found to be **pregnant** by the Holy Spirit" (NASB 2020)
"she was found to be **with child** from the Holy Spirit" (ESV)
"she was found to be **with child** through the Holy Spirit" (NIV 1984)
"she was found to be **pregnant** through the Holy Spirit" (NIV 2011)
"she became **pregnant** through the power of the Holy Spirit" (NLT)
"she was found **with child** of the Holy Spirit" (NKJV)
"she was found **with child** of the Holy Ghost" (KJV)

Except for the NLT, each translation says that Mary "was found" in this situation because of "the Holy Spirit." But what happened? Was she found to be "pregnant" or "with child"? They both mean something, and they *can* mean the same thing, but why are these translations different? Even the *New American Standard Bible* (NASB), which has prided itself as a literal translation[1] changed the wording between its 1995 and 2020 editions. So, which is it and why do these translations differ?

[1] The official descriptions of the NASB family of translations at https://www.lockman.org/new-american-standard-bible-nasb/ now uses the words "accurate" and "accuracy" far more than "literal."

Do it Yourself

Using at least 4–5 different Bibles from the example above, compare John 3:16 and make note of the differences between the translations. Then ask if there is an obvious reason the translators used different wordings. Does it make any significant difference in meaning? If so, what different meanings are possible?

It seems we should be able to find the answer simply by looking at the Greek text of this verse, right? The original phrase reads *heurethē en gastri echousa ek pneumatos hagiou*[2], which is translated literally (word-for-word, in Greek word order), "she was found **in stomach having** from spirit holy" or a little more smoothly, "she was found **having in the belly** from the Holy Spirit."

That's the literal reading, but let's be honest, it would not make sense for any English translation to say that Mary was "having in the belly" when we have a perfectly good word—*pregnant*—to describe her situation. So even the most "literal" translations often choose "smooth" over "literal." So why do some people insist that "literal" is better?

Translation Philosophy

This brings us to the *philosophy* of Bible translation and some questions we should ask as we decide which Bible translations we will use. This is not about the translations themselves but rather the thought process that goes into creating a translation.

A first question might be, "Since God inspired the original writings (not the translations), how close to the original should we be?" What would your answer be? Most people would immediately say, "As close as possible," and that's a good answer, but what does that mean? What does it mean to be "close to the original?" Another way to ask the question could be, "How far away from the original are we willing to go?"

The problem with these questions is that "close" and "far" don't really tell us anything. Would you say that "with child" and "pregnant" are close to or far from "having in the belly"? Given that the context is obviously pregnancy, you would probably say they are "close." But the words "in the belly" do not mean pregnancy in every situation. It's the context that makes them mean that.

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[2] The original text is εὑρέθη ἐν γαστρὶ ἔχουσα ἐκ πνεύματος ἁγίου.

Here we discover the most important part of both translation philosophy and Bible study—**context***. Context refers to what surrounds the word or passage we are studying. A word's context could be just the verse in which we find it or an entire book, showing how an author typically used that word as compared to a different author.

Any single word means something only in context. Most words have several potential meanings, and only when they are used together with other words can we know which meaning is intended. For example, "green" can refer to a color or to someone or something that is new, fresh, or immature. A person "green behind the ears" is new at a task, and "green wood" is from a freshly cut tree, but neither the person nor the lumber is necessarily green in color. A "green" may also refer to the putting surface on a golf course or an open area of grass. In English, we also associate the color green with the sin of envy.

> *Key principle:*
> *Context determines a word's meaning*

So, instead of asking "How close to the original text should we be?" a better question is "How can we *best present* the original languages in the receptor language?" In other words, when choosing translations for study, the top criterion should be, "Which translations best represent the original meaning intended by the author based on the words he chose?" This is the concept of **authorial intent***—what did the author mean to convey by choosing those words?

We must never forget that God is the great communicator, the one who invented language. He and Adam were having conversations in the garden before Eve was even created (see Gen 2:15–22). God instilled in Adam the ability to think in his language. He came to life with a complete vocabulary.

Do it Yourself

On the lines below, give all the meanings you can think of for the words "bear" and "table."

He could communicate with intelligence, and using that God-given intelligence, we have the ability to convert spoken languages into written form so we can communicate even without speech. Yet in the garden, the enemy was also able to use language to instill confusion: "Did God really say?" (Gen 3:1)

Long before we get to interpretation, application, theology, and other important parts of our Bible study, our first question should be, "What did God really say?" and translation philosophy asks, "How can we most accurately convert what God had written in one language into another language?"

So which translation is best?

This is the age-old question, isn't it? Someone once said, "The best translation is the one you will actually pick up and read!"[3] There is a lot of truth to that, but it doesn't go far enough. There are many Bibles read every day in print, online, and in mobile apps without the reader giving much thought to whether their translation says what the author meant.

Now, people often use broad categories to describe translation philosophies: word-for-word, thought-for-thought, and paraphrase. We have already seen that "word-for-word" is not a good way to describe that category and neither is "literal." So, are there better ways to say it? Yes, there are, and here are the ones I prefer: **formal equivalence**, **dynamic equivalence**, **conceptual equivalence**, and **optimal equivalence**. Each category has its purpose and its positive and negative features, but as the names imply, they each attempt to make their translations "equivalent" to the original text. They simply have a different philosophy that drives their approach.

*Formal equivalence**

Another way to say that a translation is "literal" or "word-for-word" is that the translators attempted to create a formal equivalence between the original

[3] This statement has been quoted in one way or another by many Bible teachers over the years. I do not know who said it first or exactly how it was originally phrased, but I believe this version accurately conveys the intent of the original speaker.

language and the receptor language (English for our purposes). These Bibles are often based on translating each word of the original text. If there is one word in Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek, they will attempt to bring it over into one word in English whenever possible. Figures of speech may be kept in their original form, even if they do not make sense in English. For example, "to cover one's feet" meant to squat or crouch to relieve oneself, since the robe would cover their feet in the process (Judg 3:24). As with the case of "having in the belly," even formal translations are increasingly more likely to translate idioms for clarity, more like the other, "non-formal" translations have done for some time.

Some words are also transliterated* rather than translated, even when the meaning of the word would help make the passage clearer.[4] In some cases, these words have become part of the English language and lost their original meaning. For example, the Greek words *baptizo* (βαπτίζω) and *baptisma* (βάπτισμα) mean to immerse one thing into another, as when we wash dishes or take a bath. However, the English words *baptize* and *baptism* have come to mean something more than total immersion. This has caused a lot of division within Christianity, simply because of a bad translation choice hundreds of years ago.

Another way these translations attempt formality is to use original weights and measures like cubits, shekels, and denarii rather than converting to modern measurements that readers will better understand.

On the positive side, translators with this philosophy tend to place an extremely high value on the fact that God inspired specific original words, so they believe each word must be reflected in the translation. In some of these Bibles, you will find words printed in italics. This was the way the translators

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[4] **Transliteration*** is the process by which an original word is shown in English letter-by-letter rather than giving the meaning of the word. Commentaries and study Bibles do this often, and you will see it throughout this book. For example, the Greek word χάρις means "generosity, favor, grace" but its transliteration is *charis*. If you cannot read Greek, χάρις doesn't help you but *charis* does.

showed transparency when they needed to add words to make it a little more readable, even though those words were not in the original text.

On the negative side, a translation can become what is sometimes called "wooden," the point that it translates the word but does not accurately convey the intended meaning. An example of this would be in the New Testament letters when a writer addressed his audience. A formal equivalent translation will usually read "brothers" or "brethren," whereas Bibles from one of the other categories may read "brothers and sisters." Technically, the Greek text has the masculine word for brother. Does that mean that Paul was writing only to the men in those churches? Of course not, but a formal translation is less likely to show the intended nuance that the original audience would have known.

Finally, formal translations are often produced for audiences with higher reading competency, usually at least a high school level.

Recommended formal equivalent Bibles

New American Standard Bible (all editions)
King James Version and *New King James Version*
English Standard Version[5]
Legacy Standard Bible
Amplified Bible[6]

[5] While the ESV translation is on this list, I cannot recommend the ESV Study Bible (especially the "Reformation Study Bible") because the notes often reflect a theological bias not consistent with the principles of interpretation I present in this book.

[6] This recommendation is on the actual text of the Amplified Bible, not necessarily the words, phrases, and notes inserted into the text.

*Dynamic equivalence**

The phrase "thought-for-thought" has often been used by some formal equivalent proponents as a critical way to accuse a translation of being "not literal." However, dynamic equivalence has the same goal as formal equivalence—to accurately bring God's word into a modern language.

The main difference between the two methods has to do with the foundational assumption about words. Whereas a formal equivalent Bible will focus on reflecting the exact words, a dynamic equivalent Bible attempts to present those words within their context. To put it another way, instead of translating just the words, this method may translate entire phrases or thoughts. A formal translator asks, "What *words* did the author use?" while a dynamic translator asks, "What did the author *mean* when he wrote those words?" As we will see, both questions—and, thus, both types of translations—are important and valuable to our study process.

The positive side to this approach is that it places a higher emphasis on authorial intent rather than on the words themselves. A dynamic translation attempts to get into the author's mind and bring that across into simple language for the modern reader. Some things are naturally hard to understand because of differences in culture, language, geography, etc., so the translators attempt to smooth those out, even when that requires moving away from the original words.

The negative side to this approach should make us cautious. If the dynamic translators get to "smooth out" and explain the text in their attempt to bring across the author's mind, there is the danger that they may insert their own theology into the translation. However, while it's true that an individual translator's theology may slip (or be inserted) into their translation, Bibles produced by committees (including those recommended below) tend to find and eliminate those theological issues before a translation is finalized and published. A single rogue translator cannot get very far when so many others are checking and rechecking their work.

Whereas formal translations require higher reading capabilities, dynamic translations are much lower, usually requiring only middle school or primary

school. Some are even marketed specifically as children's Bibles or Bibles for new Christians because they are intentionally easier to read and understand.

Recommended dynamic equivalent Bibles

New Living Translation
Good News Translation
Common English Bible
Contemporary English Version

*Conceptual equivalence**

Bibles in this category are usually called "paraphrases." Sometimes that is an accurate description, but other times it is not. The word *paraphrase* means "a restatement of a text, passage, or work giving the meaning in another form."[7] In other words, a paraphrase is something stated in other words.

A good example of a true paraphrase is *The Living Bible*. In the 1960s, Dr. Kenneth Taylor found himself restating and explaining the *King James Version* as he read to his children. He (rightly) thought that, if his children had trouble understanding the Bible, many other children and adults probably did as well, so he began to "rewrite" the Bible so they could understand it. It is a paraphrase because he took one English translation and put it into other words in the same language.[8]

The Message, on the other hand, is not a paraphrase, although it began under similar circumstances. Much like Dr. Taylor, Dr. Eugene Petersen found himself constantly restating Bible verses and passages to his congregation as he taught them from the *King James Version* week after week and came to the same conclusion as Dr. Taylor—why not officially rewrite it and make it available for others? The reason *The Message* is not a true paraphrase is that Dr.

[7] https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/paraphrase (accessed 6/29/2023)

[8] The *New Living Translation* is based on the same goal of making the Bible accessible to people, but it is a true translation from the original languages rather than a paraphrase from one English Bible into another.

Petersen did not simply put the KJV into different English words. As a scholar of the original languages, he created a brand-new translation into English. However, in both cases, Taylor and Petersen focused on the concepts presented rather than the exact words or even phrases. In Petersen's case, he intentionally used phrasing that is far different than any other translation, and it may be best to call *The Message* an "interpretive translation," rather than the generic "paraphrase," because it certainly brings across his understanding and theology (the very thing the formal side accuses the dynamic side of doing).[9] Yet sometimes this presents a wonderful turn of phrase unmatched by other translations (see the example at the end of this chapter).

Please note that these are not recommended for serious Bible study but can often be used to gain a completely different perspective on a passage that you can use as you finish your study in more accurate translations.

Popular conceptual equivalent Bibles

The Living Bible
The Message

*Optimal equivalence**

A fourth category, much newer than the previous three, has been called "optimal" because it attempts to find a balance between formal and dynamic. An optimal translator might say, "I want to get the literal meaning of the original words (formal) as long as that literal meaning reflects the author's intended meaning (dynamic)." Optimal equivalence tries to find the sweet spot, the best of both worlds. In attempting to explain this, proponents have offered words like "fidelity" and "readability." I think this approach offers the best accuracy, even if a translation is not always able to meet that goal in every

[9] Since conceptual translations are often done by one person rather than a committee, errors in theology (intentional or not) are more likely to make it into the final publication.

passage. These are the English Bibles I prefer to use in my reading and teaching, after doing as much study in the original languages as possible and comparing them to both formal and dynamic translations.

Recommended optimal equivalent Bibles

New English Translation

Christian Standard Bible

New International Version (1984 and 2011 editions)

International Standard Version

Summary

Is the best translation just "the one you'll pick up and read"? Maybe, but probably not. Because our cultures and languages are so far removed from the original, inspired Bible texts, the translation philosophies explained above offer a spectrum of accuracy, so rather than looking for "the best" translation, it is in our best interest to take everything we can from all of them so we can get the fullest, most accurate understanding of God's word. Below is a comparison of Romans 12:1 using the translations recommended above (in the order listed above). Enjoy!

Formal translations

"Therefore I urge you, brothers *and sisters*, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, *which is* your spiritual service of worship." (NASB)

"I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service." (KJV)

"I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, *which is* your reasonable service." (NKJV)

"I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." (ESV)

"Therefore I exhort you, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a sacrifice—living, holy, and pleasing to God, which is your spiritual service of worship." (LSB)

"Therefore I urge you, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies [dedicating all of yourselves, set apart] as a living sacrifice, holy and well-pleasing to God, which is your rational (logical, intelligent) act of worship." (AMP)

Dynamic translations

"And so, dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to give your bodies to God because of all he has done for you. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice—the kind he will find acceptable. This is truly the way to worship him." (NLT)

"So then, my friends, because of God's great mercy to us I appeal to you: Offer yourselves as a living sacrifice to God, dedicated to his service and pleasing to him. This is the true worship that you should offer." (GNT)

"So, brothers and sisters, because of God's mercies, I encourage you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice that is holy and pleasing to God. This is your appropriate priestly service." (CEB)

"Dear friends, God is good. So I beg you to offer your bodies to him as a living sacrifice, pure and pleasing. That's the most sensible way to serve God." (CEV)

Conceptual translations

"And so, dear brothers, I plead with you to give your bodies to God. Let them be a living sacrifice, holy—the kind he can accept. When you think of what he has done for you, is this too much to ask?" (LB)

"So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him." (Msg)

Optimal translations

"Therefore I exhort you, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a sacrifice—alive, holy, and pleasing to God—which is your reasonable service." (NET)

"Therefore, brothers and sisters, in view of the mercies of God, I urge you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God; this is your true worship." (CSB)

"Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship." (NIV)

"I therefore urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercies, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices that are holy and pleasing to God, for this is the reasonable way for you to worship." (ISV)

4

Sherlock Holmes does Bible study

One of my favorite fictional characters has always been Sherlock Holmes. While not a traditional super-hero with powers of flight or x-ray vision or even super strength, Holmes was able to solve crimes and mysteries with his extraordinary sense of observation and keen knowledge of how details came together to show the entire picture.

Over the years, I tried to emulate Sherlock Holmes. As I watched people in public places, I would try to guess details about their lives by looking at their shoes, their cars, or their clothes. I would ask, "What are they purchasing? How are they paying? Where are they going?" While I did sharpen my observation skills, I never solved any great mysteries (or even small ones, for that matter). However, I began to discover what Sherlock Holmes knew—how much the details really matter.

In this chapter, we will explore various approaches to Bible study and see if Sherlock Holmes has anything to offer us. We will also continue building our Bible study vocabulary. As mentioned in the introduction, watch for words in bold print followed by an asterisk. These are also in the glossary at the back of the book for you to reference quickly.

Approaching the text

There are basically only two ways to approach any passage we want to study. One method is Sherlock Holmes' way; this is called **deductive study***. The other method is called **inductive study***. Let's examine each method to see which is best for our purposes.

Deductive study

As I mentioned above, this is how Sherlock Holmes—and every great detective—conducts an investigation. The key to this method is knowing the result at the beginning and then finding the clues that help explain what we already know.

So, for example, a person will contact the police when he discovers that something has been stolen. That's what we know—something was stolen. We don't know who did it, how they did it, when they did it, or why they did it. All we know is that it happened. The detective's job is to examine all the evidence, find the clues that help answer those questions, and, hopefully, bring the thief to justice. In other words, the clues that the detective finds are tested against a conclusion or theory that he already has. If a clue doesn't fit the theory, it might be ignored.

This brings up an important vocabulary word and concept—**presuppositions***. When we presuppose, we are taking a piece of information as truth, even if it has not proven itself to be true. We are assuming its truth beforehand. Many times, this is fine. If we come to every Bible study assuming that the Bible is God's word and carries his authority, that will lead us to a different conclusion than someone who rejects God's inspiration of the Scriptures. That is an example of a good and necessary presupposition. We don't need to make this conclusion each time we open the Bible.

Most of the time, we don't even know that we are carrying these assumptions with us. Because they are so ingrained in our minds and hearts, we often don't think about them until they are challenged. It is only then that we are faced with the reality that we assume something that may not be true. If I walk into a room and push a light switch on the wall, I assume and expect that a light will come on. It's a reasonable assumption; it has probably happened that way hundreds of times without fail. But what happens when it does fail? What if the light doesn't turn on? My immediate reaction is probably to try again—turn the switch off and back on, as if that might change the outcome. If the light does come on, I may just go on my way, not realizing there is a hidden problem. However, if the light does not turn on, I now have to face the fact that my

assumption was untrue. The light switch did not accomplish what I wanted, and I need to do something else, find another way to accomplish my goal.

While that's a silly example, the principle applies to Bible study as well. Everything we think we know about the Bible is somewhere in our minds, and these things become the lens through which we read and study the Bible. If I grew up in a church that taught me that I need to be exceptionally good so God will forgive and save me, whenever I read the Bible about salvation, that presupposition will always be there. And, even more, as I study the Bible, I will subconsciously look for those verses that seem to support my understanding, knowing that there are people "out there" who would try to convince me differently.

And this is why the Sherlock Holmes method is not good for Bible study. The great detective would say, "Aha! We know that only righteous people go to heaven. Therefore, God requires us to be good, to do good things, to be saved and go to heaven." And for the rest of the "investigation" (Bible study), every verse that mentions good works becomes a supporting "clue," while every verse that says that salvation is a free gift that we cannot earn is thrown out or explained away as an anomaly.

The problem with the deductive method is that sometimes the "victim" is wrong. Nothing was actually stolen; they just misplaced it. And while our hero, Sherlock Holmes, would certainly figure that out eventually, he will have gone down many wrong paths along the way because his initial assumption of what happened—his presupposition—was not true, so every clue that he found pointing to the supposed crime was not a clue at all.

Inductive study

If the world's greatest detective (at least in fiction) has the wrong method for Bible study, is there anything better? Yes, there is, and, interestingly, while it uses many of the same investigative techniques that Holmes used, there is one major difference. Rather than starting with the end and finding clues to explain what we already know, the inductive method leaves the end for, well, the end. In other words, our conclusion is built from the clues, the observations

we make throughout our study. Much like a wilderness explorer doesn't know what he is going to find as he crosses new territory, the inductive method requires us to carefully examine everything we see, realizing it is just one small part of a much bigger picture. By doing it this way, we don't get to say, "This clue doesn't fit, so it's not important." We don't know what fits and what doesn't yet, so every clue is weighed carefully and equally as we build to our conclusion—what did God say?

The technical term for this study process is **exegesis***. It comes from the Greek word *exēgeomai* (ἐξηγέομαι), a verb that means "to bring out, draw out, or explain." In his great description of Jesus' incarnation, when he came to earth and added humanity to his deity, John wrote, "No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, **He has explained** Him" (John 1:18, NASB95). "He has explained" is from *exēgeomai.* When he came to earth as a human, Jesus "exegeted" the Father for us; he explained God in a way that we could understand, a way we had never been able to before.

Exegesis is the process of studying the individual parts (clues) to draw the meaning (conclusion) from the text. This includes reading the text carefully many times, doing word studies, comparing translations, and asking lots and lots of questions, the same questions that Sherlock Holmes would ask —*who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, *why*, and *how*.

Rather than assuming that we already know what a passage means, the inductive method (exegesis) causes us to work through the passage by looking at every detail and seeing how they all fit together to explain the whole thing. If something doesn't make sense or seem to fit, rather than throwing it out, we work even harder, understanding that we may have a presupposition—a previously held belief—that may be getting in the way. By acknowledging that we are bringing these assumptions with us into our study, we are more likely to let our Bible study correct our thinking, rather than letting our beliefs influence how we read the Bible.

A thorough exegetical study of a passage includes at least five parts:

1. *Working in the original language (or multiple translations) to be sure we are dealing with the nuances and range of meanings of the words*
2. *Doing a complete background study of the book and passage to understand who wrote it, to whom, when, and why*
3. *Discovering the theme of the book and passage so we don't take it out of context*
4. *Studying the grammar and individual words of the passage to find idioms, key words, wordplays, and other writing methods*
5. *Comparing the passage to the rest of Scripture, especially other things written by the same author, so we don't misconstrue his meaning*

Hermeneutics

Whatever method of study that we practice is called our "hermeneutic." Hermes was a Greek god and the messenger of the gods. (His Roman name was Mercury.) Hermes' job was to make sure that the messages from the gods made it to their destination on time and accurately.

His name came from the verb *hermēneuo* (ἑρμηνεύω), which means "to explain, interpret, or translate."[1] Luke 24:27 tells us that, after Jesus' resurrection, he sat with the apostles and "interpreted" for them the things that they did not understand about him from the Old Testament (the Hebrew Scriptures). In other words, Jesus walked through Bible passages explaining what they meant in a way the apostles could understand. This is called "hermeneutics."

[1] There are several forms of this verb which each give different nuances, but they all have this same basic meaning.

Hermeneutics* has been defined as "the science and art of Bible interpretation,"[2] but it is not limited to Bible study. When scientists examine the data in front of them, they are attempting to interpret what that data means and draw a conclusion from it. When a musician approaches a musical score, they want to bring across what the composer had in mind (authorial intent) when it was written. When you read your favorite book or magazine or blog, you are interpreting the meaning of those words so you can understand what the writer wanted to convey.

Hermeneutics is a normal part of life, but that doesn't mean it is easy. There are rules we must follow and apply (it's a science), but it takes skill and practice to do it properly (it's an art). The fact that there are so many denominations, doctrines, and disagreements about how to interpret the Bible proves that it is not something we should take lightly.

People use several different methods to attempt to interpret the Bible. In most cases, they are simply applying some form of deductive study, which is why they come to the wrong conclusions. After exploring a few of these wrong methods, I will show how and why only the inductive process is correct. Then, over the next few chapters, we will break that process down into easy steps and put it into practice.

Allegorical method

This way of interpreting things has been around for thousands of years. An "allegory" (*allēgoria*, ἀλληγορία) is figurative language, an extended metaphor using one thing to stand in for something else. Dating back at least to the ancient Greek philosophers, interpreting a text using this method assumes that there is more to the passage than it seems at first glance. In fact, what the passage *says* may not be what it *means* at all.

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[2] Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation, Third Revised Edition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1970), 1.

Unfortunately, this practice was picked up by ancient Bible scholars, both Jewish rabbis and early church teachers, and applied to the Scriptures. Sometimes, they did not understand or like how a specific passage read, so they would look for a meaning that fit their theology based on their presuppositions. For example, Isaiah 53 clearly points to an individual who would come with no fanfare, be abused and persecuted for something he did not do, die on behalf of other people without defending himself, be treated as a criminal although he was innocent, and be buried with rich people. Anyone with an open mind can see that Jesus—and only Jesus—fits this description perfectly. However, someone who has already rejected Jesus (presupposition) will never arrive at that interpretation. Instead, one of many alternate theories is that Israel must pay for her own sins and then she will be accepted by God. This is an example of reading one's own beliefs into the text (**eisegesis***[3]) rather than drawing our beliefs from the text itself.

> *There must be a hidden meaning*
> *I need to uncover*
>
> *This does not make sense, so I must fix it*

Another way this method is practiced is by looking for deeper hidden or spiritual meanings in a passage, far beyond what the text actually states. This often happens as a result of people being unable to reconcile what they read with "real life." For instance, can we really believe in talking animals (Gen 3:1–5; Num 22:28–30)? Or that God would kill his own son for sinners (John 3:16; Rom 5:8)? Isn't it more likely that these are myths or fables intended to present a deeper truth than is on the surface? A quick internet search for hidden meanings in the Bible will take you down a rabbit hole of some pretty weird ideas,

[3] Eisegesis is the opposite of exegesis. The Greek preposition *ex* means "out of" while *eis* means "into."

so I wouldn't recommend doing it. But if someone can imagine it, they have. That's not how we should do Bible study.

Tradition method

Another method people will use to help them interpret the Bible is tradition, especially church tradition. In some churches, this is required. Consider this quote again from the official catechism of the Roman Catholic church.

> The task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God, whether in its written form or in the form of Tradition, has been entrusted to the living, teaching office of the Church alone.[4]

Notice that they consider both the "written" Scriptures and the oral Tradition that has been passed down to be the "Word of God" and that only the "teaching office of the Church" (called the Magisterium) has the authority to interpret it correctly.

In this case, you should expect to hear someone say, "This is what I've always been taught" or "This is what our church believes" because their church requires that they do not come to their own conclusions about the Bible.

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[4] *Catechism of the Catholic Church, Second Edition* (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1997), §85.

Unfortunately, that response is not limited to the Roman Catholic Church. As I mentioned in the introduction, many people have never studied the Bible beyond what someone has taught them in church or classes. They have not opened their Bibles to study on their own, so their entire belief system is summed up with, "This is what I have been taught."

This is an increasing problem on college and university campuses. Children who grew up in church but did not learn how to study on their own are faced with antagonistic professors and a world that is more than willing to teach them "truth." If your student has grown up simply believing what he or she has been told but has no foundation of their own or a way to verify what is being thrown at them, don't be surprised when they start drifting (or running) from your Christian faith. This is a dangerous method of interpretation and a dangerous teaching plan in our families and churches.

> *That's what my pastor always says, so it must be true*

Personal / Theological method

If the "tradition" method is based on "what I've always been taught," the "personal" method can be summed up with the phrases, "This is what I *think* it means" or "This is what it means *to me*."

Of all the various approaches to Bible study, this may be the most insidious because it is the most subjective. A person may not know why he thinks what he does, but that is his conclusion. It could be based on one of the previous methods, but those are not taken into the final consideration. How he arrived at his conclusion is less important than what he has come to believe.

We hear this phrase all the time in small groups and Bible studies— "Well, what it means to me is that…" Without trying to be offensive, let's be clear: no one cares what it means **to you**. And you should not care what it means **to me**. If the principles of single meaning and authorial intent and the inspiration of

Scripture are true (see chapter two and pages 41 and 65), then our goal in studying is to discover what the passage means **to the author**, namely, God himself. What did God mean when he inspired it? What did the human author mean when he wrote it? What did the original audience understand when they heard or read it? That is what it means, and that leads us to the final method we are going to examine, the one that stands apart from the rest.

Literal-Grammatical-Historical (LGH) method

Standing opposed to the methods given above, the **literal-grammatical-historical*** (LGH) method is the only process that is thoroughly inductive rather than deductive, and it's the only one that—when used consistently in every passage of the Bible—keeps the interpreters (you and me) subject to the text instead of placing ourselves over it. In other words, the LGH method can be used objectively so that we stay in submission to the Scriptures and do not insert our own beliefs (no matter where they come from) into the text.

I realize that is a bold claim. I basically just said that the LGH method is the only correct method, and I wholeheartedly believe that. The reason is because of the three parts that make up "LGH"—literal, grammatical, historical. Let's see what these words mean.

Literal*

When we say we want a "literal" approach to the Bible, we mean that we want to understand the plain, natural, normal meaning of the text in front of us. We believe that "what it says is what it means."

This is no different than anything else you read every day. If you are putting together a piece of furniture or a new toy, there is almost always an instruction sheet or booklet for you to follow. Now, why we often choose not to follow those instructions is best left for a psychology book, but if you do look at the instructions, you will find that they are intended to be followed literally—step by step, piece by piece, word for word. The same is true with your employee handbook, class textbooks, novels, and legal documents. Nearly everything that we place in front of our eyes to read was created with

the assumption that we will approach the text intending to let the words on the page mean what they naturally and clearly mean.

If a word is new to you, you can ask someone what it means or look it up in a dictionary. In both cases, you are trusting someone else to give you the correct understanding. However, as we have already seen in chapter three, words mean something only in context, so the best way to understand the meaning of a new word is to look at all the potential definitions and see what best fits what the author has already written in the context of the passage you are reading. As this is true in other parts of our lives, it is true in Bible study as well.

Grammatical*

The grammatical part of our method requires that we work within the rules of grammar and syntax for whatever language is being studied. Now, this is where it gets a little more difficult because, while our Bible study may be in English (or another native language), the Bible was written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. This means that the rules we must follow are the rules of the languages originally used.

I can already hear the collective groans. "I've never been good at grammar or languages. Do I have to learn all those things? I thought Bible study was for everyone!" To be sure, as we saw in the previous chapter, modern English (as well as many other languages) has a wealth of very good translations. However, what makes a translation "good" is its accuracy in bringing the message of the original languages into the language of the readers, and that requires a mastery of the rules of those languages.

What makes this interesting is that most languages allow figurative expressions—similes, metaphors, hyperbole, and others—and they all have their own rules. The original writers and audiences knew these things, so they are rarely explained in the text. It is up to the translator (and even the interpreter, to an extent) to make sure we are not making the Bible say something it does not say by violating the rules of the languages in which it was written.

Historical*

The final aspect of the LGH method is the recognition of the historical context of our passage. We often make the mistake of bringing a Bible passage into our context when we read it. In our minds, we see the people with the same skin color and complexion that we have. We imagine them speaking our language and sharing our values or our level of literacy or understanding.

In many ways, we could not be further from reality. When we do not understand the variety of cultures and practices in the ancient Middle East, the wonders of Babylon and Persia, or the sophistications of Greek and Roman law, philosophy, and technology, we can easily miss so many nuances that the original readers considered without a second thought.

This brings up another important principle and term for our Bible study process: the **principle of single meaning***. This principle says that a passage has only one legitimate meaning and that is what it meant when it was originally spoken or written. While we may be able to find numerous modern applications of an ancient passage, it is impossible to assign it additional meanings or different meanings than it originally had. We will cover this in more detail in chapter 9.

Summary

Of the two approaches to Bible study, most systems and people use a *deductive* method—they start with what they think the passage means and use their Bible study to confirm it. Their foregone conclusion may be based on what they've been taught previously or just what they've come up with themselves before actually studying the passage or topic. My apologies to Mr. Sherlock Holmes, but this is a terrible way to study the Bible because it always puts the interpreter and his or her opinions over the Bible.

On the other hand, the *inductive* study method—when used consistently every time—forces the interpreter to examine every detail and build his or her conclusion based strictly on the Bible, not their church, pastor, commentary, or

anyone else. The inductive method requires us to read and interpret the original words in their original context and culture and insists that the author's original intended meaning is the only legitimate meaning.

Do it Together

Let's take a look at one well-known example of figurative speech from the literal, grammatical, and historical perspectives.

In John 10:7, Jesus said, "I am the door for the sheep." Since there is no record that Jesus worked with sheep or that he ever worked as a door, how are we to understand this "literally"?

Literal A "door" is not necessarily a slab of wood or metal or even a curtain, though that is what many people might think of first. At its most basic, a door is simply something that covers or blocks an opening. So, if one person is standing in front of another person who is trying to see something else, the second person might sarcastically tell the first, "You make a great door." The first person is blocking the view of the second.

When Jesus said he was a door, he simply claimed to be blocking an opening or standing in the way of someone or something passing through. This is a literal interpretation of Jesus' words and meaning without being silly and imagining him with hinges and a doorknob.

Grammatical The Greek language that John used to record Jesus' statement allows for similes and metaphors to make a point. A simile compares two things using "like" or "as"— "My daughter dances like the wind." A metaphor goes even further and does not require those key words— "That ball player is on fire today!"

When Jesus said, "I am the door," he used a commonly known item (a door) to make an important statement about himself. This created a more powerful visual than simply saying, "I block/open the path."

Historical In the first century, shepherds would often sit or sleep in the entrance to their sheepfold so the sheep didn't get out and predators couldn't get in. The shepherd served as the door. When read in the context of John 10, we can see this is exactly what Jesus meant. Rather than talking about literal sheep, though, he explained that people had to go through him for eternal life. There is only one entrance to eternal life, and Jesus himself is at the doorway. Only by coming through Jesus can someone receive life, and once they are in, he keeps them secure.

By using a common illustration, possibly even pointing to a sheepfold nearby, Jesus made sure his audience knew exactly what he meant. If a reader today doesn't understand it, it's not because Jesus wasn't clear but rather because they are missing the historical context that everyone else knew and used to interpret Jesus' words. There is no other legitimate way to interpret the passage.

Do it Yourself

Another one of Jesus' famous "I am" passages is in John 15:5, where he said, "I am the vine; you are the branches." Using the same principles as shown above, give a brief explanation of how the literal-grammatical-historical aspects might help us understand this.

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Grammatical

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Historical

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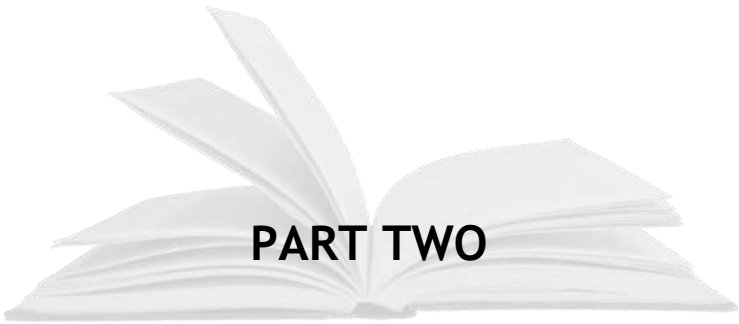

PART TWO

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ACTS: A basic four-step process

Building on what we have learned in the previous chapters, we are ready to introduce the process that will help us make sure we consistently use the LGH hermeneutic in our Bible study.

There are many methods that various teachers and preachers have presented, and most of them are based on three steps: 1) making observations, 2) coming to an interpretation, and 3) applying what you have learned.

The four-part process I will present over the next few chapters generally follows this same pattern but adds another important step, making it a little closer to the **scientific method***. Because I wanted something a little more memorable than the classic "observation–interpretation–application," I created the acronym ACTS, reminding us that a growing disciple of Jesus acts appropriately as a result of our Bible study. As many good teachers have reminded us, our Bible study should end in transformation, not just information. Two of the best examples of this in the Bible are in the book of Ezra and Paul's encouragement to Timothy.

> "Now Ezra had dedicated himself **to** the **study** of the law of the LORD, **to its observance**, and **to teaching** its statutes and judgments in Israel." Ezra 7:10

> "Every scripture is inspired by God and useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the person dedicated to God may be capable and **equipped for every good work**." 2 Timothy 3:16–17

While the scientific method includes making observations and coming to a hypothesis (interpretation), there is also the important step of testing one's

conclusions to make sure that our small sample size has not inserted bad data into the process. In other words, we don't want to build false doctrine because we didn't consider everything. So, I am suggesting a third step between interpretation and application that gives us space to test our interpretations.

Bible reading or Bible study?

Over my years as a teen, youth leader, and adult leader in our church and a Bible teacher at different levels, I have noticed that we often create a false distinction between reading the Bible and studying the Bible. Sometimes this comes across in statements like, "Well, I read the Bible every day, but I just don't have time to really study it." Or we (maybe) unintentionally imply that "study" is for classes and small groups, but reading is for everyone.

I think this has set up a wrong idea about both Bible reading and study. Take a minute to answer this question in your mind: *We cannot study the Bible without reading it, but can we read the Bible without studying it?* Your answer probably depends on how you define "Bible study." No matter your answer, here are a few follow-up questions for you.

> *What are some potential benefits of reading without studying?*
>
> *What are some potential downfalls?*
>
> *If you could spend one year reading through the whole Bible or one year studying just one section (such as the New Testament, Paul's writings, or even just Romans), which would you prefer, and why? Which would provide the most benefit to you right now?*

One thing I like about the ACTS method is that it can be used both for deep study and to enhance your daily reading. Whether your habit is to read only ten minutes or one full chapter per day, adding the ACTS method will enrich your reading without necessarily turning every day into a full-blown Bible study. But be careful: you might find out that reading better will whet your

appetite for deeper study and your ten minutes will not cover as much text as it used to. And I say that's a good thing!

ACTS

As I mentioned above, the ACTS process builds on the traditional method and is similar to the scientific method. Don't let this put you off. While we may not always agree with the conclusions that scientists present, we must admire the method that most of them follow as they honestly try to make sense of the world around us. The four steps of the ACTS method are:

1. **A**sk questions
2. **C**ompose your thoughts
3. **T**est your conclusions
4. **S**ubmit to God's Word

Now, in addition to the many questions and rabbit trails your study will present, you need to know that each of these four steps will ask one big question that we are attempting to answer in that step. We will go through these in detail over the next several chapters, but here is the journey your Bible study should take:

> "Step 1—Ask questions" wants to know "What does this passage *say*?"
>
> "Step 2—Compose your thoughts" takes the work from the first step and proceeds to "What does this passage *mean*?"
>
> "Step 3—Test your conclusions" leads us to wonder "What did I *miss* in my study?"
>
> "Step 4—Submit to God's Word" challenges us to consider "How should I *respond* to the truth in this passage?"

As we'll see in the next chapter, there is nothing special required to follow this study method. I've used pens, pencils, and notepads for years, but I also use Bible software and note-taking apps. I encourage you to find and use the

method(s) that work best for you. If you use Logos Bible Software (logos.com), I have created a free public "TIFE ACTS Workflow" that you can download into your app and use as a template for your study.

Do it Yourself

1. Choose a Bible passage or narrative that you would like to study as you work through this book.

2. Without reading it, write down the presuppositions you know you will bring to it. (What do you already think you will find in the passage?)

3. Read the passage once to see if there are any other presuppositions you became aware of.

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Step 1: Ask questions

What seems like it should be the most obvious step is often, surprisingly, the most overlooked—reading and making detailed observations about the passage we are reading or studying.

I cannot tell you how many times a person has asked me questions about a specific passage, and they have told me what they think it means, what other writers or teachers have said, but when I ask them pointed questions about the passage itself, they cannot answer because they have not truly engaged with the text.

It does no good to know what everyone else says about a passage if you don't know what it says. The first question we must answer is:

"What does this passage *say*?"

As we noted in our chapter on deductive and inductive study, we can easily get sucked into a subjective way of thinking, but the best research and study requires intense **objectivity***. This is why it is so important to acknowledge our presuppositions at the beginning of the process, so we don't unintentionally let those drive our study. Objectivity is seeing the truth for what it is without bringing our own ideas (which can be foolish or false) into the mix. This is why we start with what the passage *says* before attempting to determine what it *means*, and this requires following a few steps to help safe-guard our process.

I want you to choose a passage that you will be studying throughout the enclosed workbook. Each of the following chapters will provide space for your study, but you can use a notepad, notes app, or Bible software if you prefer. The process is the same no matter the tools you use. For purposes of real-life examples, I will be working in John 15:1–17.

Read the passage

You might be surprised to see this here, but there is more to it than meets the eye. Do you remember the discussion of translation philosophy in chapter three? Here's where that stuff finally becomes useful.

It is not enough to read the passage just once. Throughout this process, you will probably read it in whole or in part dozens of times, and that's good. To begin, choose at least one translation from each of the three recommended lists in chapter three. (Ultimately, you'll want to read as many as you can.)[1] Reading from a mix of formal, dynamic, and optimal equivalent translations will give you a well-rounded perspective of what the author was trying to convey in his original language. I recommend waiting until later to read any paraphrases or conceptual equivalent translations. They can insert more interpretation than we want at this step in the process.

> **If you are incorporating this method into your daily reading, multiple translations or readings may not always be suitable.*

Many Bibles have section headings and paragraph breaks. These can help us focus on just the section we are studying, but be careful; those headings (and sometimes even chapter and verse numbers) are not inspired and are not always placed well. Make sure you are reading everything that goes with the passage. For example, Matthew 16:28 makes much more sense when read together with chapter 17 instead of the verses immediately before it (just ignore the big, fat "17" standing in the way).

At first, just read straight through your passage in each of your three (or more) translations. Don't stop to think about it or ask any questions yet. Your goal is to become familiar with the whole thing before you start taking it apart.

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[1] If you are multilingual, reading in different languages can be helpful as well.

Descriptive or prescriptive?

One of the easiest and most important questions we should ask is often one of the most overlooked: is the passage descriptive or prescriptive? By quantity, **descriptive passages*** make up much more of the Bible than prescriptive. As the name implies, a descriptive passage describes something—a person, an event, a genealogy, and so on. In chapter one, I introduced four types of literature that we find in the Bible: historical narrative, poetry/wisdom, letters/epistles, and prophecy. While all four contain descriptions of what happened (or what will happen), historical narrative and prophecy are primarily descriptive. Yes, there are commands throughout historical passages, but it is usually easy to see who was meant to obey them. The purpose of these passages is to teach us about God and how he works and to give us an example of how to live without specific commands. "These things happened as examples for us, so that we will not crave evil things as they did" (1 Cor 10:6).

Prescriptive passages* are a little more pointed and less frequent in Scripture. While there are timeless commands for all of God's people throughout the Bible, we find explicit commands for Christians primarily in the New Testament letters (Romans through Revelation).[2]

You can think of these passages like the prescriptions you receive from the doctor. If you have a medical condition, the doctor may think it can be helped with medicine. He or she sees a specific issue requiring a specific dosage of a specific medication. The prescription the doctor writes is a kind of command—exactly how much medicine you should take, at what time, and for how long. Prescriptive passages do the same thing. Rather than simply giving historical information, they contain commands and teachings for how "to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age" (Titus 2:12).

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[2] The wisdom books stand on their own because they do not necessarily describe historical events or give many explicit commands. Rather, they offer encouragements and examples of how to live well. As we will see in upcoming chapters, determining the intended audience of these encouragements is important for proper interpretation.

Every person comes into this world with a terminal disease called "sin," and while salvation through Jesus' death and resurrection promises our complete healing in eternity, it doesn't remove it altogether during this life. However, as our Great Physician, God knows exactly what we need now as we await our final cure, so he wrote prescriptions throughout the Bible, telling us how to live, what is good for us and what is not, and plenty of encouragements to keep us on the right path. We often call this process "sanctification," but more common terms are growth, maturity, and discipleship.[3]

It is important to determine what type of passage you are studying early in your study process because the type of passage makes an enormous impact on how you understand and apply it. For example, if you are reading in Joshua, where God told the Israelites to kill specific enemies as they went through Canaan, the question of descriptive or prescriptive makes a big difference. Should you read Joshua 6 as a historical account of what happened (descriptive) or as God's instructions for how you should deal with your enemies today (prescriptive)? Hopefully, you admit that burning down a city isn't what God is calling you to do. That's a silly example, but it becomes much more serious—both practically and theologically—when people take commands and promises that God gave to other people and start applying them to themselves and others. Do the dietary commands of the Old Testament apply to you? Has God promised to make you healthy and wealthy today like he promised the nation of Israel? Is tithing required for Christians?

Because some passages are full of commands, we may not always know whether they are for us or someone else. We will go into more detail about how to figure that out in the next chapter, but for now, start your study by asking whether the passage is commanding or encouraging someone to do something or simply telling you what happened in the past or will take place in the future.

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[3] For detailed information about the process God gave us to grow in our spiritual lives, see my book, *Biblical Discipleship* (Exegetica Publishing, 2020).

Take notes

As you read, you probably noticed some differences in words or phrasing. Now, read it again—slowly—in those same translations. This time, start making notes as you come across any differences that seem significant or that you think could affect your interpretation. (Whether they do or not is a matter for later in the process.)

Let's look at John 15:6 as an example. (In my full study, I would do this for every verse in my passage.) I have chosen the NASB2020 for my formal translation, the NET for my optimal, and the NLT for my dynamic. I'm looking for differences that catch my attention and may be significant. As I study further, I should discover if they are important, but for now, I'm just taking notes.

Helpful tip: It is best to number your notes clearly (or mark them in some other way) so that you can reference them later more easily. You will not have to copy/paste or rewrite them if you don't want to; instead, you will be able to refer to their number or notation. I discuss categorizing notes more in the next chapter. In the example on the next page, I will use combinations of bold, italics, and underline to keep them separate.

Now, those are not all the questions/observations I could take from this verse, and my whole passage is seventeen verses, meaning that this is going to take some time, but this gives you an idea of the scope of what this step is about. And that brings up an important fact about the ACTS method:

> *This should be the longest and most difficult step in your Bible study process*

John 15:6

"If anyone does not remain in Me, he is **thrown away** like a branch and ***dries up***; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are ***burned***." (NASB 2020)

"If anyone does not remain in me, he is **thrown out** like a branch, and ***dries up***; and such branches are gathered up and thrown into the fire, and are ***burned up***." (NET)

"Anyone who does not remain in me is **thrown away** like a **useless** branch and ***withers***. Such branches are gathered into a pile to be ***burned***." (NLT)

Initial questions/observations about translation differences

1. Is there a significant difference between "thrown away" (NASB, NLT) and "thrown out" (NET)?
2. The NLT describes the branch as "useless." Is this warranted and, if so, does it make it difference?
3. The NLT uses "withers" instead of "dries up."
4. Is there a difference between "burned" (NASB, NLT) and "burned up" (NET)?

As you work through your passage, writing down questions and taking notes, remember that **this is a marathon, not a sprint**. Unless you are doing this study to teach a class or deliver a message, there's no deadline, so don't rush it. (And if there is a deadline, by now you should realize that you should start this process earlier than you may have thought.)

Misinterpretation often happens simply because we are not familiar with the text, so long before we try to understand the meaning of our passage, we should spend whatever time is necessary to squeeze as much out of the

passage as we can. If we do it well, the interpretation will often come very easily.

Answer your questions

Even though it is the "A" of the ACTS process, asking questions is really only half of our goal. While asking questions is fun and interesting, getting answers is even better!

Now, this is where a lot of people get into trouble. Rather than spending the time to find the answers in their passage, many people will immediately read the study notes at the bottom of the page in their Bibles, or they will open a commentary or ask a pastor or friend. While these things can be good when used appropriately, this is not the right time, which brings us to an important rule of our process:

> *Do not use commentaries at this step in your study process!*

Listen: study notes and commentaries are great; I own them and use them, and there are several I love and recommend. But this is not the time to use them…not yet. Here's why:

If your study process is just reading everyone else's notes and thoughts, then you may become an expert on what they think it means, but you'll never have the gratification of seeing it for yourself, and you will have cheated yourself by not having the tools to understand a passage when the study notes and commentators come up short or are simply wrong. You will be a classic example of "children, tossed back and forth by waves and carried about by every wind of teaching" (Eph 4:14), constantly driven by someone else's theology.

Never forget that a commentary is nothing more than an imperfect human's "comments" or opinion on a passage. That opinion may be right, or it could be wrong, but how would you know if you haven't done the work

yourself? Save the commentaries until later in the process, and you will find them to be much more helpful and your study much more satisfying.

So, then, if we won't use commentaries yet, where can we find the answers to our questions? In the passage itself and the surrounding context. Many, many times, the answers to our questions are just a verse or chapter away. The Bible does an amazing job of explaining itself; we need to let it do so.

Now, to be sure, not every question will be answered in the passage. Sometimes, like the book of Revelation, for example, the answers are found elsewhere in Scripture. (The Old Testament prophets explain most of the things that John saw in his vision.) Obviously, we can't read the entire Bible every time we have a question in one passage, so that means we have a couple of options.

One option is to simply leave that question unanswered until we can use study notes and commentaries. That's not a bad option at all, even though some of you will not like having that many unanswered questions. Essentially, we're admitting that we don't know enough to fully understand the passage without some help, and that's a level of humility we should all bring to our studies.

Another option (and some may think this should be listed first) is to read some larger context around the passage. Maybe back up one or two chapters to see if the writer has already said something that speaks to the issue. One of my questions from John 15:3 is "What did Jesus mean by 'clean'?" While that is not answered in my immediate passage, just two chapters earlier, Jesus had an entire discussion about being clean (John 13:6–10). So, his simple comment in chapter 15 builds on something he told the apostles earlier.

Sometimes, if you have the time, you can look at what else the same author wrote to see if he answered your question somewhere else, without having to read the entire Bible leading up to your passage. This can take a great deal of time, but the result is worth it.

The final option is one I offer hesitantly for two reasons. First, I don't want to sound like I am contradicting myself. Second, this can easily be abused, once

again defeating the purpose. However, while we do not want to use commentaries yet, there are times when other resources can provide helpful information. The resources that I am thinking about here are Bible dictionaries or encyclopedias, books on ancient cultures and customs, and word study resources. (I will address word studies in just a moment.)

While commentaries often provide this type of information and refer to these other resources, their primary goal is to help you understand the meaning of the passage. That is what we are trying to avoid in this step. While it may seem counterintuitive, looking at several resources that primarily offer facts without comment is better than reading something that provides comments on the facts. In the "Select Bibliography" at the end of this book is a short list of fact-based resources that you may find helpful when necessary.

Word studies

The last part of our first step is to do word studies whenever possible. Now, I admit that this is more technical than the previous steps, and you may be tempted to avoid it or wait until commentaries are available. Let me encourage you to learn how to do this well yourself. Your study, your theology, and your Christian life will be richer because of it.

A word study is exactly what it seems to be—the study of individual words in our passage. Why would we want to do that? Here are just a few reasons:

1. As we noted in chapter three, context determines a word's meaning. This is because most words have a **semantic range***, a range of legitimate meanings from which the author could choose as he was writing. Word studies show us the various potential *meanings* so we can see potential *nuances* the author wanted to get across.

2. Speaking of potential nuances, sometimes we know the basic meaning of a word but don't know everything it may include. A dictionary can be a great source of information, not only for potential meanings but also for more detail about each of those meanings. Sometimes

these seemingly minor details add a little "seasoning" to our understanding of the passage and end up making a big difference.

3. If #2 is true in one language (English, for example), we can expect that it is also true in other languages and that a word in another language may have different nuances than an English dictionary would tell us. This is where we start getting into original language studies (word studies in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek).

Let's spend a moment on that last point. If I type the word "evil," you get a picture in your mind of what "evil" means. However, that one English word is used to translate nearly a dozen different Greek words in the New Testament. Each of those other words has its own range of meanings (#1) which may provide a nuance (#2) that the original audience would have noticed but does not automatically come across in our translations.

For example, the NET, CSB, and ESV all translate the final phrase of 2 Cor 5:10 as "whether good or evil." Since Paul was talking about Christians receiving rewards at the Judgment Seat of Christ, one might assume he had in mind good deeds versus evil, sinful deeds. After all, did he not also write, "For I do not do the good I want, but I do the very evil I do not want!" (Rom 7:19)? However, a look at the Greek text of these verses shows us that Paul used two different words that are translated as "evil." In Romans, the word is *kakos* (κακός), which has to do with morally evil or harmful. However, the word in 2 Corinthians is *phaulos* (φαῦλος), which means low-grade quality. So, at the Judgment Seat of Christ, Jesus will not be considering our sinful actions (because those are forgiven); instead, he will reward us based on the quality of the service we do for him in this life.

As you can see, doing word studies can be as simple as opening an English dictionary to make sure that we fully understand the words in front of us, but it can also mean looking up the words in the original language to see if there are things that our translations do not bring across. Watch my video on "How to do word studies" at theologyisforeveryone.com/bible-study for more information about original language word studies.

Summary

The first step of our inductive Bible study process is to gather as much information from our passage as possible. This requires reading it several times in different translations, asking lots of questions, and taking lots of notes as we find answers. It may also include studying the meanings of certain words in our passage to make sure we have the best understanding of the author's intention as he wrote. This should be the longest and hardest part of our process as we try to squeeze every last drop from the text.

General questions to ask about every passage

1. Who wrote this passage?
2. What do I know about him that may impact my understanding of the passage?
3. When did the writer write this passage (or the whole book)?
4. Where was the writer when he wrote this passage?
5. Who was the writer's primary original audience?
6. Why did the writer write the book that includes my passage?
    a. Was he addressing problems that the audience was facing?
    b. Was he answering questions that they had asked?
    c. Was he giving a historical account of something that had happened in his lifetime or before he was born? Was he an eyewitness of the events he wrote about?
7. Does the passage include someone speaking who is not the writer? If so, who was the original speaker?
8. Does the passage have a built-in audience (the speaker's audience) that is different from the writer's audience? (E.g., Matthew's audience did not necessarily attend the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5–7)
9. What seems to be the theme of this passage?
10. What key words can help determine the theme? (Look for theological terms, repeated words, and words that have cultural significance.)

Sample questions from John 15:1–17

1. What was the significance of the vine to the Jews? (vs. 1)
2. Why did Jesus say "true vine"? Did he mean to imply there was another vine or a false vine? (vs. 1)
3. What did Jesus mean by "prune" and "clean"? (vs. 2–3)
4. What did Jesus mean by "fire" and "burned"? (vs. 6)
5. Which commandments was Jesus referring to? (vs. 10)
6. How many different ways did Jesus refer to fruit? (vs. 2, 4, 5, 8, 16)

Do it Yourself

1. Read the passage you chose at the end of the previous chapter in at least three translations (formal, dynamic, and optimal).

2. Note some obvious differences between the translations and anything that immediately catches your attention.

3. Write down any words that you think you should study further.

4. Ask the general questions listed above and other questions that come to your mind. See if you can find the answers in the immediate passage or context.

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Step 2: Compose your thoughts

Once we have spent the hours (or days or weeks, when we have the time) wringing everything we can from our passage, then and only then are we ready to start our interpretation process.

Now, in reality, we begin interpreting the passage as soon as we read the first line. We can't help ourselves. We start putting things together in our heads as we read and ask questions. The answers we find start to make sense of what we are reading, especially if we are carefully considering the context. So, it's not honest to say we've done no interpretation yet, nor is it wise to even try to do so. What we can say is that this is the *formal* step when we intentionally bring together all the data we've discovered and begin composing our thoughts.

As with the previous step, let me remind you that **you are not to use any commentaries or other study helps yet**. Our goal is to get everything we can from the passage itself and the surrounding context. We will use study helps in the next step, but for now, keep them closed. You are allowed only your Bible and your own notes for now.

"What does this passage *mean*?"

Interpretation deals with *meaning*. The proper meaning of any given passage is available only after thorough exegesis is complete. Remember, exegesis is the study process by which we "draw out" the data from the text. It is our search for the clues that will lead us to the meaning.

In one sense, I do not prefer the concept of *meaning* here because that can lead us to believe that we have found the definitive answer, and that's not always the case. At this step, the scientific method really shines because scientists will work with a **hypothesis***. A hypothesis is a tentative conclusion based

on the evidence but one that has not yet been tested and proven. While our goal is to reach a conclusion, it's possible that we must go through several revisions of our thoughts before arriving there. We are "composing our thoughts" based on the data we gathered in step one.

Much like the character, Buttercup, in *The Princess Bride* discovered that when Westley said, "As you wish," he was really saying, "I love you," in the same way, when we ask, "What does the text mean?" we are really asking:

What was the author thinking?

Where is the author leading us?

What message was the author attempting to get across?

Interestingly, the interpretation process is a little different for everyone. It depends on your preferred study type, personality, and the way your brain works, so there is not a "one-size-fits-all" approach to this step any more than there was with step one. The questions you asked, the way you sorted and categorized them, and even whether you used paper or a computer will affect how you bring all that together as you compose your thoughts. However, I can give you a series of ways to work with your notes to make sure that whatever method you choose produces the best result.

Categorize your notes

The first step when composing your thoughts is to get a handle on your data. You may have pages upon pages of notes—questions you have asked, answers you have discovered, and probably questions without answers yet. What you do with all this information will help you get to your interpretation of the passage.

The first thing you should do is look for every question that does not have an answer. The more of these that you can resolve right away, the better it is for your process. Reading through all your unanswered questions again accomplishes at least two things. First, you remind yourself of the "clues" that

did not make sense initially and what you might still be looking for. Second, you may discover that you already have your answer in a different section of your notes. It's possible that you found the answer at a different point in your study and forgot you had asked the question. This process helps bring the different parts of your study together into a cohesive whole, especially if it took some time to gather your observations.

Once you have found as many answers as you can, it is time to go back through your notes and put them into groups or categories. (This is where your notation system will be helpful.) How you do this is completely up to you. Some people like to use different colors. Others use a series of shapes or other markings to distinguish between their notes. Some people prefer to keep their notes together with the verses or paragraphs of the passage, while others are looking for topics. There is no wrong way to do it.

For example, in my study of John 15:1–17, I may put a green mark next to every note that has to do with "fruit," mark "abide" with blue, and mark "Jesus" (including "I," "me," and "my") with yellow. I know some of you want to stop reading right now because you can't believe I chose those colors! As I said, your study will reflect your personality.

Instead of colors, some people prefer symbols that are quicker to see and identify. So, again, in my study, maybe "fruit" gets an up arrow (to symbolize growth), "abide" is double underlined (to symbolize stability), and "Jesus" gets a triangle (to symbolize the Trinity).[1]

Regardless of your style, marking your notes causes you to review them again carefully, remind yourself what you have already learned, and start putting the pieces together.

If you have used paper or notepads, you may find it worth re-writing your notes in their new groupings to make it easier to see them together. If your

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[1] Kay Arthur's inductive Bible study method has an entire system of markings and colors that many people love and use regularly. It is way too much for my personal style and makes my notes very messy, but I know others who won't study without it. You can find out more at precept.org. (This is not an endorsement of everything that ministry presents or produces.)

notes are on a computer, cut-and-paste or drag-and-drop may be a much quicker way to put them together. It also makes searching easier when you are trying to find or remember something you wrote.

Find the main thought/theme

One of the general questions from the list in the previous chapter was, "What seems to be the theme of this passage?" The theme is the main subject or topic that the passage is about, and organizing your notes can help you find that theme. Depending on the length of your passage, you may discover one primary theme with several subthemes. Other passages may have one or more themes or topics that seem to be equally important. If you are preparing to teach your passage, you could use these as your outline points.

Sometimes the writer makes the theme obvious. For example, in 1 John 5:13, John wrote, "I have written these things so that…" He let us in on his purpose for writing, which should tell us that is in the forefront of his mind. (Do you remember "authorial intent" from chapter three?)[2] Other times it takes a little more work, and you may find that what you thought was the theme may not be after all. Many people think that "joy" is the main theme of Philippians because it is a repeated word and topic. However, a closer look reveals that "joy" is a subtheme, a byproduct of something else. The main theme is unity with each other and with Christ, which results in joy, gratitude, contentment, and the other things Paul exhibited in that letter.

That brings up another part of our process. As you review your notes (and read the passage yet again), look for repeated words and phrases. You may have put these in your notes already, so look for any occurrences you may have missed. This repetition can help you identify the main theme or subthemes. There are many good examples of this:

- "God said" occurs repeatedly throughout Gen 1 along with the variations "God blessed" and "God called"

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[2] In fact, John wrote that four times in 1 John, which helps us see his purpose and outline for the entire letter.

- "One thousand years" occurs six times in Rev 20:1–7
- "His love endures forever" is found in the second line of every verse of Psalm 136

As you can tell, there is some overlap now between steps one and two. While composing your thoughts, you will find yourself asking more questions. Organizing your notes may reveal something you did not see at first, so you want to explore that further. Don't let that discourage you! It's actually very good. The more you learn, the more you will question and want to learn; this is a natural and healthy part of the process.

Review the context

In the previous step, sometimes our questions led us outside of our immediate passage into the verses and chapters immediately before and after what we are studying. This practice can be especially helpful because most Bible passages do not stand alone. They come out of a previous section and lead into the next, so our understanding must take that into consideration.[3]

As you bring your notes together, it is a good idea to review the context around your passage. Something may make sense now that you didn't see before. Or you may decide that you didn't read enough of the context now that you understand your passage better. Reviewing the context immediately surrounding your passage and even other books written by the same author can provide enormous benefits to your study.

A key principle to remember here is that **Scripture can and often does interpret itself**. Because God cannot contradict himself, Scripture cannot contradict itself. When there is something difficult to understand, many times you will find another passage that is not difficult at all and helps clarify your passage. Of course, we want to make sure that the "clear" passage actually

[3] Exceptions to this rule may include some of the psalms, the proverbs, and some parables. In these cases, though, there is still often something in the context that can help us understand it, even if it is a self-contained unit.

speaks to the same topic as our "unclear" passage, so we don't end up misinterpreting it, but using Scripture to interpret itself is an important part of studying the Bible in context.

Investigate figurative language

So far, we have been working under the assumption that the Bible is written in plain language and is meant to be understood. In our chapter on Bible translations, however, we acknowledged that there are legitimate uses of symbols and figurative language throughout the Bible. No matter how our translations present them, we need to interpret them carefully.

In many cases, you will find that your study has already "solved" these things for you. Often, the writer explains his use of these grammatical tools directly in the passage. Here are some examples:

- In Romans 5:14, Paul said that Adam was "a type of the coming one." A *type* is a pattern or a model. In this case, Paul was comparing Adam and Jesus based on their character and actions.
- In Galatians 4:24, Paul clearly stated that he was about to explain his point with an allegory, where one person or thing stands in for another. The fact that he pointed this out shows this was not his normal way of teaching or writing.
- In Revelation 12:1, 3, John explained that the woman and dragon he was about to describe were "signs." It does not mean that every detail happened in literal history but that something did literally happen as illustrated in his vision.

But what about those times when the writer did not explain his figurative language? How do we handle those accurately? In many cases, the reason that they are not explained is that the writer thought his audience would understand them without trouble. This helps us remember that we are reading a passage written in and to a cultural, historical context that is foreign to us. The trouble is not that the passage is difficult to understand. The trouble is that we

are foreigners to that culture. Or as many others have said before, we are reading someone else's mail.

At this point, many people are tempted to jump to their commentaries, and that is understandable, but let me make another suggestion. Rather than reading a commentary, which is usually meant to give theological and interpretive insight into the passage, use a resource that is more fact-based and focused just on the culture and history that you are missing.

I reluctantly mentioned these resources in the previous chapter, and you may have already looked at them. If not, now would be a good time to make use of resources like these, as you come to the end of the interpretive process. They may include Bible dictionaries and encyclopedias, Bible handbooks, and other works on ancient cultures. The "Select Bibliography" at the end of this book provides a short list of resources to get you started.

In some cases, you may not find a satisfactory answer, so you leave that as an unresolved question until you have access to more study resources.

Deal with unresolved questions

Speaking of unresolved questions, it is time to take one last look through your notes to see if there is anything that you have not yet been able to answer. (Some people would say that if you don't have unresolved questions, you haven't asked everything yet!)

There is a good chance that you have a few questions that you simply forgot about, and you can easily move them around and add them to what you have learned. It's just a little bit of final clean-up in your notes.

However, there may still be some things outstanding that you could not explain, answer, or understand. Your passage did not explain it. The context did not add anything. Your word studies did not help, and examining the historical references could not give you the information you wanted. What can you do?

In this case, you may have to leave these blank as you move on. I know that's not what we want, but it is part of the process. Remember, in the scientific method, your conclusion is still only tentative until it has been tested and

proven. In our process, we are just about ready to do that. But first, you need to finish composing your thoughts.

Write out your conclusion

In most cases, you are probably satisfied with your study. You've spent a great deal of time reading and re-reading, writing and re-writing, asking and answering, and you are confident that you have a good understanding of what God has given us. That means that it is time to put it all together.

The final piece of "Step 2: Composing your thoughts" is to write a commentary on your passage. Now, this is not nearly as daunting as it sounds. As we'll see in the next chapter, a commentary is simply one person's opinion (comments) or conclusion about the passage. Your final action in this step is to write out your conclusion, your commentary on the passage based on the work you have put into it.

This is not necessarily meant to be a summary or a quick review. This is your understanding of everything you've studied, based on the literal (normal), grammatical (words, phrases, and figurative statements), and historical (cultural) interpretation of the text in front of you. This could be several pages long, depending on how much you want to include.

Again, your personality will determine the form of your commentary. If you are more of a teacher (analytical mindset), you may choose to write detailed bullet points for each verse straight through the passage. You may highlight the things you discovered in your word studies and have several sections under each verse. If you are planning to teach this passage, this would be a good time to organize your notes into an outline that you can share with others.

If you are more of a writer (creative mindset), you may decide that essay form makes sense for you. You might write it more like a story, bringing out how the culture helps clarify certain points and how you can see the theme presented throughout.

If you tend to be more of a practical thinker or a hands-on person, your commentary may highlight the commands, the expected responses, or the timeless principles that everyone can understand and obey.

Regardless of your final format, it is essential that you bring this part of your study to a conclusion by explaining (to yourself and others) what you have learned. Is it possible that you are wrong, that you misinterpreted something? Yes; we haven't tested our theory yet, but that does not negate the hard work you have put into it so far. So…

Congratulations! You just wrote a commentary!

John 15:1–17

Finding the main thought/theme

In my "Ask questions" step, I learned that the word "abide" or "remain" is repeated most often (11 times), followed by "fruit" (8 times). This leads me to think that these provide the theme of the passage, and everything else supports that.

It is tempting to think that "bear fruit" is the primary command. However, most of the time, the action of bearing fruit is the purpose or result, not the main command ("*so that* you may bear much fruit," vs. 8). Since "abide, remain" is an action verb, and since it is usually a command ("abide in me," vs. 4) or description ("the one who abides," vs. 5) and not a purpose or result, I conclude that the command is for us to abide with the result that abiding in Jesus causes us to bear fruit. Jesus' statement in verse five supports this interpretation: "Apart from me you can do nothing" (including bearing fruit).

Reviewing the context

Jesus was eating the Passover meal with the twelve apostles, and in chapter 13, he washed their feet. When Peter asked for a full body cleansing, Jesus replied that Peter was already clean and needed only a rinse (vs. 10). In 13:21–30, Judas left the group to betray Jesus, and at the end of chapter 14, Jesus and the Eleven left the upper room, so the conversation in John 15 was between only Jesus and the Eleven (not Judas) on the route to Gethsemane (not in the house). In verse three, Jesus told all the men the same thing he previously said to Peter, that they were already fully cleansed based on the teaching he had given them. I understand this to mean that they were true believers (as opposed to Judas).

However, they still knew very little about what was going to come after that night, especially about the Holy Spirit and the church. Jesus told them some things about the Holy Spirit in chapters 14–16, but there was still much they did not know. Before going into the garden for his prayer, Jesus ended

this conversation with the Eleven by telling them that persecution was going to come but that they should expect it and choose to trust and find their peace in him (16:31–33).

Investigating the figurative language

This passage (at least the first part) is based heavily on figurative language. Jesus called himself a "vine" and his followers "branches." Obviously, they were humans, not plants, but understanding how plants literally work should help me get his point.

Jesus compared pruning branches to the washing from chapter 13, so I can understand that the same word that cleansed the apostles could prune, or remove, things in their lives that could prevent them from being as fruitful as they could be. Jesus said that God the Father is the one who does the pruning, so I can be confident that he knows what is best for us and skillfully uses his word to convict us and cut away those things that are not spiritually healthy.

Dealing with unresolved questions

In my study, I asked some questions that required further study outside my passage. Here are a few examples of things that I studied in more detail.

1. What does it mean that an unfruitful branch is "taken away" (verse two)?
2. Does "fire" always represent hell or eternal damnation?
3. Does the warning in verse six mean that those who do not bear fruit will be sent to hell? Does that mean that someone can lose their salvation as some people teach?
4. Do verses ten and fourteen mean that God doesn't love us and that Jesus is not our friend if we do not obey him, that God's love is based on our obedience?
5. Does Jesus' comment in verse 16, that he chose them, mean that God selects individuals to be saved?

Do it Yourself

1. After organizing your notes into manageable groups or categories, make a list of the themes or topics that you see naturally showing through. Take special note of words or phrases used repeatedly in the passage.

2. Re-read the context surrounding your passage and make a note of anything new that you did not see previously.

3. Notice any figurative language that is designed to help explain what the writer or speaker wanted to bring out.

4. List any questions that you have not yet been able to answer.

5. Write out your commentary on this passage.

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Step 3: Test your conclusions

As I hope that you have discovered by now, my insistence that you do not use commentaries during the first two parts of your study process has been a help, not a hindrance. It has forced you to slow down and methodically work your way through the text itself, not someone's opinion about the text. It has required that you ask questions that you otherwise may have missed altogether or taken for granted that someone will ask for you. What you have gained by not using these resources to this point is far greater than what it seemed at the outset that you would lose.

But let's not take this practice too far. Since you have put in the hard work of study, you may think that commentaries are not necessary, but that's not true. Just as it is not good to use commentaries too early in your study, it's also not good to ignore them altogether. Jesus gave teachers to his church for a reason (Eph 4:11), and our job is to learn to use his gifts properly. So, what is the right way to use them?

As I mentioned in chapter five, each of these four major steps in the study process asks and answers a big question. "Step 1: Ask questions" helps us explore *What does the passage say?* while "Step 2: Compose your thoughts" helps us discover *What does the passage mean?* At the end of the last chapter, you wrote your own commentary on your passage. Between your word studies, outline, or whatever else you have produced in your study, you have a good idea of what God wants us to know from that passage.

There's still one problem: you don't know everything. I don't know everything. No one knows everything, except God, and he didn't include everything in the Bible. No matter how much time and effort you have put into your study, there is a good chance that *someone*, *somewhere* in the world, at *some point* in history, might have known *something* that you don't know, and that piece of information may impact how you should understand your passage.

Where do we find that information? Study resources, commentaries, theology books, and scholarly friends. The proper way to use these gifts from God is not to ask them, "What does it mean?" The proper way to approach these teachers is to ask,

What did I *miss* in my study?

What do you know that I don't know? We ask this of teachers and experts in every other industry. We ask them to teach us, to fill in the gaps in our current knowledge base. The best of them will have us do our work first before just giving us the information, and that is what we have done here. You have gained as much as you can without their help, and now you are ready to fill in the rest.

Types of study resources we need

So, what type of information are we looking for, and what resources are available to help us? There are at least three areas where your knowledge probably could use the help of others: original languages; history, culture, and background information; and theology.

Before we consider each of these and how study resources help in these areas, let me give one big disclaimer. Never, ever forget that all these resources are written by humans and have the potential to be wrong. Only the Bible is completely accurate, infallible, and trustworthy (see chapter two). All these resources (including your writings and mine) must be read and filtered through the Scriptures. So, my recommendations at any point in this book do not mean I agree with everything they believe or teach. It is up to you to use discretion and discernment as you read them.

Original languages

This is not the first time we have addressed the concept of the original languages. As mentioned in chapters one and three, the Bible was written

primarily in ancient Hebrew (with a little Aramaic; Old Testament) and Koine Greek (New Testament), which were the common languages of their respective audiences at their time in history. What we read and study today, whether it's English or another modern language, is a translation of copies of the original ancient writings.

You don't have to be a language scholar to know that languages change over time. Depending on your age, you may have experienced several changes in your native language throughout your lifetime. Words that used to mean one thing, no longer have that meaning, and new words are being created and added to our vocabulary every year. That causes at least three problems when it comes to Bible study.

First, the evolution of language is not a modern issue; it has happened since God invented language in Genesis 1. Ancient Hebrew, Aramaic, and Koine Greek are only snapshots within the full history of those languages, and we can see in our Bibles how things changed from the earliest writings to the later, even within the same languages. So, even if you knew one of those languages at one point in their history, it would not guarantee that you would understand everything written in that language centuries later if you did not keep up with the changes.

Second, within every language we find subsets of vocabulary and usage. Some terms may be used in one industry but not another, or a word may have a nuanced meaning to one person that another person may have never considered. Not only that, but people with different education levels tend to write differently. Even if you have a working knowledge of a language, there is a good chance that someone knows words that you don't know, so their writings may give you trouble.

One of my favorite examples of this is the term *unionized*. Depending on your background and interests, you may have read that as "union-ized," that is, someone or something that is part of a union. However, if you work in sciences, like chemistry, you may have read it as "un-ion-ized," that is, not being converted into ions. Both are trade words that require a very specific context to reach their intended meaning and audience.

Third, even if an ancient word was common (not specialized) and never changed in meaning, there is no guarantee that the words of the receptor language (your modern translations) have not changed in meaning since your translation was made. Many "modern" English translations are between 30 and 60 years old now, and the edition of the *King James Version* that people are most familiar with was done in 1769. So, not only do you need to be aware of changes in ancient languages but the changes to your own as well.

The point is this: If you are content using only one Bible—your preferred Bible—you will inevitably miss something in your study. This is why I recommend using multiple translations over the spectrum of translation philosophies to gain a well-rounded understanding of the passage. But sometimes reading multiple translations leads to more questions than answers. "Why did one team translate it this way while another team made this translation?" This may be one of the questions in your notes that you have not yet been able to answer.

Later in this chapter, I will explain the different types of commentaries that are available, but for now, let me say that this is where certain commentaries can be invaluable. Some scholars are experts in the original languages, and after researching all these changes and nuances, they can help you get through the technical difficulties to the important information you need to help you understand why the original author chose the word or grammatical nuance he did. This is information that you would likely have missed without the help of these teachers and scholars.

History, culture, and background information

In the previous chapter, we discussed that there is often background information that the biblical writer did not include because he knew his audience would already know those things, and that information would easily and naturally inform their understanding of what he was telling them.

But when we are removed from the original audience by thousands of years, by language, by geography, and by culture, not having that information in the context of our passage can be a hindrance to fully understanding the

writer's intent and meaning. This is another area where commentaries and other study resources can be invaluable.

In addition to the Scriptures themselves, we have translations of ancient historians who explained their world. While men like Josephus, Herodotus, and Philo were not Christians and they often embellished their writings to make their heroes look better than they were, if you can look beyond those things to the descriptions of everyday life, these historians often give an interesting and helpful perspective to the culture of their day. Other writers, like Alfred Edersheim, spent a great deal of time researching ancient cultures so they could help modern readers get a better understanding of the framework in which the Bible was lived and written.

One subcategory that I should mention when it comes to geography is maps and atlases. Knowing that the Israelites entered the land of Canaan from the east side of the Jordan River after passing through Edom and Moab means nothing if you don't have a basic understanding of the geography of the ancient world. The same is true as we read of Jesus' travels in the gospels or Paul's mission trips throughout Acts. The ability to visualize those journeys, to see the layout of the terrain, and to calculate the actual distances between cities can be crucial to understanding a passage.

For example, after Paul arrived in Corinth, it had been some time since he had heard from Timothy about the situation in Thessalonica (Acts 17:1–15) and he had become concerned about Timothy and the believers there to the point that it was affecting his ministry in Corinth (1 Thess 3:1–5). However, once Timothy finally arrived in Corinth with good news, Paul's mind was set at ease, and he was able to devote himself to the ministry there (Acts 18:5). Why did Timothy take so long to respond to Paul's inquiries? Because the distance between Thessalonica and Corinth is more than 260 miles (420km), and it takes a long time to walk that far!

Theology

The third area where we can often use help is in theology. We will go into more detail in chapter 11 on how to study theology, but a quick introduction

here will be useful. Strictly speaking, "theology" is the study of God.[1] More broadly, it refers to the study of anything related to God, the Bible, and religion.

If you were to visit a library and look in their theology section (if they have one), you might find different types of theology that you could reference. A multivolume **systematic theology*** is designed to give a comprehensive look at the major doctrines of that religion. It will divide the doctrine into categories to keep topics together, and it will often reference other theologians for support or to argue against. Often, books are written on individual topics of theology or religion (like this hermeneutics book) rather than being part of a series. A **biblical theology*** is narrower, preferring to stay within the confines of the Bible itself. It will not include as much from other writers and may be categorized by Bible book or writer rather than theological topic. **Historical theology*** is the study of how theology developed over time. As you can imagine, the church was not born with a fully formed system of beliefs. As God revealed more information, and then as scholars and teachers fought against heresies that crept into the church, they systematized and hardened their beliefs into what we too often take for granted today, 1,900 years later.

Now, if something from that previous paragraph is new to you, it is likely that there are things you may have missed in your study, and that is exactly how these additional resources can help you. They can show you how your passage relates to other passages throughout Scripture on the same topic. They can show you how theological thought grew over time as teachers and scholars studied and debated. They can offer insight into how a presupposition that you brought to the passage developed and why it may or may not be legitimate. All these things should cause you to take another look at your passage and your notes before saying that your study is complete.

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[1] "Theology" comes from the two Greek words *theos* (θεός, "God") and *logos* (λόγος, "word, statement, or matter"). When *logos* is used as *-ology* at the end of a word, it usually means "the study of."

How to use commentaries and study resources

So, what is the process for using these resources effectively? Solomon probably had no idea when he wrote, "There is no end to the making of many books, and much study is exhausting to the body" (Eccl 12:12), and Gabriel made quite the understatement when he told Daniel, "Many will dash about, and knowledge will increase" (Dan 12:4). At the time of this writing, the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. has more than 25 million books cataloged. This does not include millions of other non-book papers, maps, videos, and more. Of these, there are hundreds of thousands of resources related to theology. This makes two things remarkably clear. First, there is no way for us to access all these resources in our study. And, second, even if we could, we would not have enough time to use them all. So, what do we do?

The first step is to learn who you can trust. This is both easier and more difficult than it seems. It's easy because you probably already have people you know and trust who can recommend resources to you that you can trust by association. So, if your pastor recommends a resource and you trust your pastor, there is a good chance you can trust that resource, at least partially. Hopefully, if you've made it this far through this book, you have come to trust me as well, and I have included a short bibliography at the end of the book with some resources that you can generally trust. I say "generally trust" because humans are still capable of making mistakes, and some of the resources I've included are really good in most areas, but I disagree with some of their presuppositions or conclusions. You'll notice a disclaimer at the beginning of the bibliography that states that I am not endorsing everything they say or write.

And that is what makes it difficult to learn who to trust. There are some writers and scholars that I greatly admire, some of whom are still alive and I am privileged to call my friends. They are brilliant thinkers and have helped me tremendously in my spiritual growth and understanding of Scripture. But they also have these little things that I can't believe they believe. They write things about a passage that just don't make sense to me at all because my study

has led me to a completely different conclusion. Which one of us is correct? God knows, and we will, too, when we are in heaven. But until then, I'm not going to disregard everything these godly writers have produced simply because I think some of their positions are a little strange. But it will cause me to use their resources a little more carefully than other writers who don't have those peculiar ideas.

This leads us to the second step in the process of using study resources correctly. Remember, the big question for "Step 3: Test your conclusions" is *What did I miss in my study?* A writer with an unusual perspective on your passage can still be helpful because, even if you don't agree with his conclusion, his method for arriving there may give you an insight or angle that you would never have come up with on your own. Sometimes it can be helpful to read people you know you disagree with because there is a good chance they saw something that you missed, either in the passage itself or in the context, language, culture, or theology of the passage.

Taking notes

As you read through the commentary on your passage,[2] continue to ask questions and take notes.

What did the writer see that I did not see?

What questions did the writer ask that I did not ask?

What insights does the writer offer because of his or her skills and experience that I don't have?

Did the writer answer any of my questions that were still unresolved?

What is the writer's conclusion/interpretation of the passage?

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[2] By "commentary," I am referring to any study resource, including your pastor, seminary professor, Sunday School teacher, etc. For our purposes, any person or writing that you use to help you understand your passage is a commentary.

Filtering data

Let me give you a big warning here: the fact that a commentary answers a question or includes information that you did not have does not automatically make it correct.

> *Do not accept someone's work as truth simply because they are famous or published*

This means that you should not necessarily change your interpretation when you read someone who comes to a different conclusion than you do. While you may end up agreeing with them eventually, that should not be the automatic result. You must take all the new information that you gathered from them—insights, answers, conclusions, etc.—and filter it back through your study process. It may be that something they wrote genuinely changes your perspective. But it could be that you have already disregarded something they thought was important, and they did nothing to make you think otherwise. Their conclusion should not automatically become yours. In fact, there are three potential outcomes each time you use a commentary.

Same conclusion, same path

In many cases, especially as you get better and better in your study techniques, you will discover that some commentaries have very little to offer you. There may be minor details that you did not know, but none of them affect your conclusion. You and the commentator saw the same things and came to the same conclusion.

Same conclusion, different path

Sometimes as you're reading a commentary, it seems as if the writer is going to end up with a different interpretation than you did. They asked

different questions or had different information than you had, but somehow, you both arrived at the same conclusion.

In this case, you should still filter their new information through your process to confirm that it all still makes sense and does not change your conclusion.

Different conclusion

In some cases, however, the commentator will present a completely different interpretation than you have. Don't worry, and certainly don't throw away all your notes! Use this to sharpen your study skills. Go back through the questions above and put their questions and answers through your process.

Remember: the purpose of this step is to see what you missed. It's possible that they know something that legitimately should change your conclusion, but you need to have them support their work. You know why you think the way you do; give them the courtesy of explaining themselves. Once you've done this, there are three definitive outcomes.

First, *you may disagree with them*. After filtering their work through your process, you may find that they did not adequately support their position. Maybe they did not answer a question or point that you had that would make a difference. It's okay to walk away from a commentary disagreeing with their conclusion, but only after you have given their work an honest review.[3]

Second, *you may agree with some or most of what they wrote but not everything*. Again, that's fine as long as you have honestly compared notes and allowed them to explain their position. One neat thing about commentaries and other study resources is that they give you the chance to argue and debate with someone you will likely never meet in real life. You can engage in thought with

[3] I say this primarily with reference to solid, biblically sound resources. Obviously, if the writer is not a Christian or holds to clearly aberrant theology, their work should carry much less weight in our study. Even still, the saying that a broken clock is still correct twice a day fits here. Even people with horrible theology sometimes ask solid questions that we would have missed.

a person who has been dead for hundreds of years through the work that they left. It's truly a wonderful blessing that we have in our modern world!

Third, *you may discover that what you missed in your study truly changes your conclusion*. If what the commentary presents is true (and you can verify that with other writers and resources), then your conclusion was simply wrong. Had you taken your notes to a class and presented your findings without testing your conclusions against other godly scholars, you may have found yourself unintentionally promoting a false doctrine.

In this case, the right thing to do is to humbly thank God for the correction and change your interpretation, based on the solid evidence presented by these other writers and teachers.

Three types of commentaries

There is one last point I need to make before we end this chapter, and that has to do with different types of commentaries. In the same way that Bibles span a spectrum of translation philosophies, Bible commentaries and study tools have different purposes, methods, and philosophies as well. Knowing and being able to identify them is like being able to select the correct tool from your toolbox for the job you are working on. Knowing what is available will help you select and use appropriate resources the way you use different Bible translations. Study resources may be categorized into three broad types: technical, expositional, and devotional.

Technical resources

I am using the term "technical" to mean specialized, precise, or scholarly. This type of commentary is often a thick book or a series of books because the writers want to give as much information as possible from many different angles. These are sometimes called "exegetical" commentaries because they attempt to "draw out" the meaning from the text, the same way I have described throughout this book. Another term sometimes used for this type of resource is "critical."

For a technical resource, the text is the main focus. These can sometimes be a little dry or hard to read (but not always) because they often do not include stories or illustrations. Their goal is to examine the text and give the best detail they can.

These commentators often work with the original languages, sometimes even preferring to use their own translation rather than one that is available on the market. They may spend several paragraphs on one word or phrase, trying to squeeze every bit of meaning from it.

Other tools that fit this category are lexicons (original language dictionaries), cultural and background books, and some theology books.

My favorite example of this type of commentary is Dr. Harold Hoehner's commentary on Ephesians. It is a monster of a book that took him decades to complete. It contains 930 pages plus introductory material, which is more than most entire Bibles! The formal introduction alone is 130 pages before he reaches the first verse, and he wrote 20 pages on just Eph 1:1–2. You might think that is overkill; who needs that much? In addition to translating and explaining every word in Paul's short letter, Dr. Hoehner read everything he could and quoted from others generously, meaning that he has provided one place for you to test your conclusions against many writers without having to go find them yourself. And if you want to read more, his bibliography of other Ephesians commentaries is nine pages and full of titles from which you can choose. He did not include a full bibliography because he said it would be another 100 pages by itself, so he fully cited everything in the footnotes throughout his work.

Unfortunately, Dr. Hoehner did not cover the entire Bible with that level of detail, so let me suggest another commentary that is comparable.[4] For many years, Dr. Thomas Constable has written and updated his *Notes* on the entire Bible, and he has chosen to make them freely available online. At the time of this writing, you can find them as one of the resources at https://netbible.org

[4] Hoehner's *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ* is another example of great detail on a small portion of Scripture and another book I highly recommend.

and access them from https://planobiblechapel.org/constable-notes-html in HTML or PDF format.

Expositional resources

The second type of resource is less detailed than the first. If technical resources focus on the text itself (Step 1: Ask questions), expositional resources tend to focus on the meaning (Step 2: Compose your thoughts). This does not mean that they ignore the text or the details, but they do not include as much of that in their writing. Using an example from the food industry, rather than giving you a cookbook and explaining each ingredient, where it comes from, and why that exact amount is used, expositional resources are more interested in the preparation of the meal and how the ingredients taste when they are properly mixed.

The word "exposition" means explanation, and these commentaries are often written more like sermons. Sometimes they are called "homiletical" or "pastoral" or even "explanatory" because they walk you through the explanation of the text. You often find stories, anecdotes, or illustrations the same way you would hear them in a sermon. Sometimes they may even include a short application of the passage.

While you will find a lot of Greek and Hebrew in technical resources, there will be much less of that in more expositional commentaries. There are times they may discuss a specific word, but that is not the goal. Also, while technical commentaries often work with just a few words at a time, expositional commentaries will put entire sections together (e.g., John 15:1–17 rather than each word of John 15:6).

A great example of this type of writer is Dr. Warren Wiersbe. He was an amazing combination of both scholar and pastor, and his writings (his *Be* commentary series and *The Bible Exposition Commentary*) are easy to read, often feeling like a conversation with an old friend.

I should point out that, as with anything, sometimes resources fit into one or more categories. A good commentary that finds a balance between technical and expository is the *Bible Knowledge Commentary*, edited by John Walvoord

and Roy Zuck. As an expository resource, it is based on the NIV translation of the Bible and does not get too detailed into individual words, choosing rather to focus on larger sections of Scripture. On the other hand, the writers do engage with the original languages and don't spend a lot of time telling stories or giving illustrations to explain their points. They include historical information that is helpful but do not have as many footnotes as Hoehner or Constable. And the fact that it is a two-volume set (one each for the Old and New Testaments) means that they had to minimize some details.

Devotional resources

The final type of commentary can be considered more devotional, practical, or inspirational. This is commonly found in Bible study books and topical Christian books, but there are some commentaries written this way as well. Whereas technical commentaries focus on the text itself and expository commentaries focus more on the meaning of the passage, devotional commentaries often put a heavy emphasis on the application or practical aspects of the passage. Going beyond just the meaning, these offer real-life examples of how they think you should put the passage into practice.

While the application of the text is important (as we'll see in the next chapter), commentaries written with this focus often miss the bigger picture in the Bible and can offer applications that simply don't fit the context. In other words, they can tell you to do or believe something that is not meant for you to do or believe. The reason for this is that they may not have done the exegesis from the first two steps of the study process, meaning that their presuppositions and theology affect the way they see and apply the passage.

This does not mean that these types of resources are bad, but it does mean that you need to be especially careful with them. One example is the *Life Application Study Bible*. It even has "application" in its name! Rather than study notes on the translation or the technical details in the text, you'll see that many of the notes focus on how to live.

Daily devotionals like *Our Daily Bread*, *Morning and Evening*, and *My Utmost for His Highest* are also good examples. They will present a short

passage—sometimes just one verse or part of a verse—and try to make a practical application from it. Again, there are often good insights there, but the focus is on what to do with the passage rather than the passage itself. This can be very dangerous because it ignores the context.

Much like the Conceptual Equivalent Bibles from chapter three, in most cases, it may be best to avoid this type of resource altogether or at least save them until the end of your study for one last perspective.

Summary

Using study resources outside the Bible such as Bible scholars, pastors, study Bibles, and commentaries is an important way to both check your conclusions against other godly teachers and see what you may have missed as you went through your process. It takes discipline to make sure that you use these resources at the right time in your study and skill to use them the right way, but the reward for doing so is great. I hope you are experiencing a sense of accomplishment that you no longer must rely on others for your Bible study and understanding. You have learned that every believer has the same Holy Spirit helping them and that the teachers are there to help with what you miss, not to do all the work for you.

John 15:1–17

Technical commentary

One of my questions was about verse two where a branch is "taken away" if it is not fruitful. That didn't sit well with me for two reasons. First, completely unfruitful branches are dealt with in verse six, so why are they mentioned in verse two? Second, there is a progression from "bears fruit" (vs. 2) to "more fruit" (vs. 2) to "much fruit" (vs. 5, 8) to "fruit that remains" (vs. 16). The branches in verse two seem to be at the beginning of the growth process, so removing them so quickly seems odd.

In studying the word translated "taken away," I found that it can also mean "lift up." It makes more sense that the gardener would try lifting and working with the branch first. Then, if it still does not bear fruit, it will be cut off and "thrown out" (vs. 6). Dr. Constable came to a similar conclusion:[5]

> What happens to the believer who bears no fruit? The Greek word *airo* can mean "to take away" or "to lift up." Those who interpret it here as meaning to take away (in judgment), believe that either the believer loses his or her salvation, or the believer loses his or her reward, and possibly even his or her life, or the opportunity to serve the Lord. Those who interpret *airo* to mean "to lift up," believe that these branches get special attention from the vinedresser so they will bear fruit in the future.
>
> The second alternative seems better, since in the spring, vinedressers both lift up unfruitful branches and prune (or cleanse, Gr. *kathairo*) fruitful branches of grapevines. Cleansing the branches involves washing off deposits of insects, moss, and other parasites that tend to infest the plants. Jesus gave this teaching in the spring, when farmers did what He described in this verse.
>
> …

[5] Thomas Constable, *Notes on John*, §15:2; https://www.planobiblechapel.org/tcon/notes/html/nt/john/john.htm

Assuming that this is the correct interpretation, Jesus was teaching that the Father gives special support to believers who are not yet bearing fruit. In viticulture (the cultivation of grapevines), this involves lifting the branch off the ground, so that it will not send secondary roots down into the ground, which would prove counterproductive. Lifting the branch off the ground onto a pole or trellis also enables air to dry the branch and prevent it from getting moldy and becoming diseased and unfruitful.

Expository commentary

Instead of addressing whether the word means "lift up" or "take away" Warren Wiersbe thoughtfully discussed the broader issue of God's pruning.[6]

> This pruning process is the most important part of the whole enterprise, and the people who do it must be carefully trained or they can destroy an entire crop. Some vineyards invest two or three years in training the "pruners" so they know where to cut, how much to cut, and even at what angle to make the cut.
>
> The greatest judgment God could bring to a believer would be to let him alone, let him have his own way. Because God loves us, He "prunes" us and encourages us to bear more fruit for His glory. If the branches could speak, they would confess that the pruning process hurts; but they would also rejoice that they will be able to produce more and better fruit.
>
> Your Heavenly Father is never nearer to you than when He is pruning you. Sometimes He cuts away the dead wood that might cause trouble; but often He cuts off the living tissue that is robbing you of spiritual vigor. Pruning does not simply mean spiritual surgery that removes what is bad. It can also mean cutting away the good and the better so that we might enjoy the best. Yes, pruning hurts, but it also helps. We may not enjoy it, but we need it.

[6] Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 356.

Do it Yourself

1. Read Dr. Constable's notes on your passage (visit netbible.org or planobiblechapel.org/constable-notes-html).

2. List here some of the things you missed in your study and note how they may affect your understanding of the passage.

3. Also, note whether you came to the same conclusion as Dr. Constable about the meaning of the text or a different one.

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Step 4: Submit to God's Word

The final step in our ACTS study method seems like it should be self-explanatory. Once we have studied and understood the passage properly, what is left but to obey it? This step is often referred to as "application" and comes with the question, "What should I do now?"

In chapter five, I wrote that a growing disciple ACTS on God's word, so it seems that the natural question at the end of our study should be about action, doing something. The trouble is that not every passage has an action for us to perform. Yes, many passages lead us to obey a command or worship God, but others insist that we *stop* doing something (which could be considered an action) while others call us to sit quietly and reflect in silence (again, some may consider this an action).

But many passages seem to have no action required at all. What should I do when I read in the prophets of God's destruction of ancient people? What action should I take when reading through the dietary laws of ancient Israel, knowing that I am not under that law code? What am I supposed to do when I read Paul suggesting that Philemon accept his slave back as a brother rather than a slave?

You see, while I firmly believe that all Scripture is equally inspired by God and equally authoritative as God's word in every generation, language, and culture, I also believe that it does not apply equally to all people of all time. There are parts of Scripture that have different applications based on the audience, culture, situation, etc. In other words, not every application is a "do."

So, rather than asking "What should I *do*?", the question "Step 4: Submit to God's Word" seeks to answer is:

How should I *respond* to the truth in this passage?

While it's true that all actions are likely a response to our study, not every response will necessarily be an action, so our submission to God's authority in our lives needs to be based on the truth we have discovered in our study of his word.

> "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for **teaching**, for **reproof**, for **correction**, and for **training** in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work."

Based on 2 Timothy 3:16–17, God wants the Bible to accomplish at least four results in our lives. Dr. Warren Wiersbe provided a great way to remember these four results, and they fit perfectly with our goal of submission: "They are profitable for **doctrine (what is right)**, for **reproof (what is not right)**, for **correction (how to get right)**, and for **instruction in righteousness (how to stay right)**." (boldface added)[1]

Sometimes our response to these things is a lifestyle change, new actions that may replace old actions. Other times, instruction provides new knowledge that may not have an associated action (yet), but it is something we need to know and accept as truth. This is why our goal in Bible study should be a proper response, even when that response is not an action.

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[1] Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 253.

Deciding how to respond

Because the Bible was written to people thousands of years ago in different languages and locations than we live, deciding how to respond to God's instruction is not always easy. In fact, there are several things we must take into consideration. Fortunately, these come directly from the three previous steps of our study. Specifically, we want to ask two important questions to help us determine our response: *How did this apply to the original audience?* and *Are there any timeless truths for me?*

How did this apply to the original audience?

If you are or have been a teacher or you work with curriculum design in some way, you will be familiar with the phrase "scope and sequence." This is sometimes called the "teaching plan" or "lesson plan." The "scope" is the content of the curriculum—what is going to be taught, what a given course will cover. The "sequence" tells when the teacher plans to present that content. As an example, the scope of this book includes an introduction to the Bible, the Bible study process, and some theology. How I have chosen to present that information is the sequence shown in the Table of Contents.

You may have never thought of it this way before, but the Bible has a scope and sequence as well. John wrote that "Jesus performed many other miraculous signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not recorded in this book" (John 20:30) and even a glance at a science or history book tells us that the Bible does not include all aspects of human knowledge or details about everything we want to know. God decided that the scope of the Bible would include matters related to science, mathematics, and history, but the narrative would follow relatively small groups—the nation of Israel and the church—while leaving out a lot of other details.

Additionally, even though we have a completed Bible to read and study today, God chose to not present all that information at once. Instead, he dripped it out slowly and had it written, recorded, and compiled over time as we saw in chapter one. He also declared that the church age is not the end of

human history and that after the church age is completed, he will give new revelation and new laws for the people living in that future time (Joel 2:28–29; Jer 31:33).

This concept of scope and sequence is essential to how we respond to our study of Scripture. A Bible book may not be a lesson plan in the traditional sense, but it does have a scope of content and sequence to its flow of thought, and every good student of the Bible needs to understand that or end up in confusion. It is important to recognize not only what the ancient audience *did* know but also what they *did not* know. We must be careful to not place our knowledge of Scripture on them and find things in their writings that they could not possibly have known.

For example, Paul wrote that the church—the new body of Christ composed of believing Jews and Gentiles together—was a mystery that was not revealed until God gave it to him (Eph 2:11–3:13). That means Moses' and Isaiah's and David's scope did not include that information, so if we find the church in their writings, we have put it there. The Old Testament contains a wealth of doctrine that informs church teaching (God, sin, salvation, humans, etc.), but it does not have any teaching about the church itself. This means that we must be careful to not take for ourselves many of the commands, promises, and blessings that we find throughout the Old Testament writings.

Not only does each writer have a limited scope of content but so does each passage. Again, every passage has only one meaning that we must discover before deciding our response. That meaning comes from the specific content and context of the passage. So, for example, when God recorded the account of David and Goliath in 1 Samuel 17, we read it as a historical narrative of something that literally occurred in Israel during the life of David. Goliath was a literal warrior, not just a fear or an addiction, and the meaning has nothing to do with facing giants in your life today. Is it possible to use the battle between David and Goliath as an illustration to learn something about battling addictions? Yes, it may be, but that was not in David's mind the day he faced that giant.

Let me give you one final thought on this. Someone once said that if you're having a hard time understanding or applying certain parts of the Bible, it may be that you're reading someone else's mail. There are many parts of Scripture that you can learn from even though they aren't written to you, but part of your job is to determine whose mail you're reading and not take something that was never meant for you to take.

Are there any timeless truths for me?

Another name for a timeless truth is "general principle." When we realize that there was something specific for the original audience that does not apply to us in the church age or in our modern cultures, we need to dig just a little deeper to see if any part of the passage goes beyond the original audience. We shift our attention from looking at the immediate commands to more general principles that are not limited to those first readers or listeners.

The question that helps us determine if something is a general principle is this: *Does this principle or teaching appear anywhere else in Scripture, to a different audience or in a different context?* If the answer is "yes," then you may be dealing with a timeless truth or general principle for all people of all time.

For example, one of the Ten Commandments is "You shall not murder" (Ex 20:13). However, if we can establish that the Ten Commandments were given to a specific group (national Israel) at a specific time in history (after their deliverance from slavery in Egypt, Ex 20:1–2) and were not given to Christians and the church, we might wonder whether the prohibition of murder is applicable today. After all, we readily admit that most of the other commands (dietary laws, things relating to ceremonial uncleanness, etc.) don't apply, so maybe that doesn't apply either.

So, we ask our question: does God prohibit murder anywhere else in Scripture or just in Israel's law code? In our research, we discover that God established capital punishment for murder immediately after the Flood in Genesis 9:5–6, a thousand years before he made it a law in Israel. Looking into the New Testament, after the church began, we find that the apostles regularly continued to list murder as a sin (Rom 1:29; 13:9; Gal 5:21; 1 Pet 4:15; Rev 21:8; 22:15).

From this we know that God's command against murder is a general principle, a timeless truth that was not limited to ancient Israel. While a Christian is not bound to the law of Moses, God has repeated some of those laws and commands throughout history, making them applicable even today.

This process can also help answer the question of apparent contradictions in the Bible because the concept that something can apply at one time in history or for one group but not another often makes people nervous. We will deal with this in a little more detail in the next chapter but let me give you one example here.

In Matthew 6:14–15, following the Lord's Prayer, Jesus said, "For if you forgive others their sins, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, your Father will not forgive you your sins." Let me ask you: is God's forgiveness dependent on yours? Is it true today, for Christians, that God will not forgive you if you do not forgive someone else? The answer is an emphatic "no!" That is not true at all. On the contrary, Paul wrote, "Be kind to one another, compassionate, **forgiving one another, just as God in Christ also forgave you**" (Eph 4:32). According to Paul, we should forgive because we have already been forgiven. So, which comes first: God's forgiveness or ours? In the church age, we forgive as a response to God's forgiveness, not the other way around.

Does that mean that the Bible contradicts itself as so many unbelievers accuse? Not at all. When we realize that Matthew 6 and Ephesians 4 have two different audiences at two different times in history, the answer is plain. In Matthew 6, Jesus had not yet died and risen, and the church had not yet begun. He was still offering himself to Israel as their Messiah and presenting what they needed to know to accept him and his kingdom. When they rejected him, his message and methods changed until the cross, after which the church began. Paul, writing about 30 years after Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount, was correct that God is doing some things differently now than he did before the cross. There is no contradiction, only a change in God's methods.

Although the Lord's Prayer and the Sermon on the Mount certainly include some timeless truths (such as our dependence on God, Matt 6:11, 25–34), we

must be careful to not take the entire thing for ourselves because we are not the original, intended audience. The more we study the Bible, the more we know and understand God's word, the better we can see the timeless truths in the text and not take someone else's mail, even unintentionally.

Our goal in Bible study

As we conclude this section explaining the ACTS study method, let me remind you of how I introduced the method in chapter five. I created the acronym ACTS to remind us that a growing disciple of Jesus must act upon his or her Bible study. As we have seen in this chapter, "action" is better understood as a heart response that may or may not require us to do something right away. Regardless, what is true is that our Bible study should end in our transformation, not just fill our heads with information. Paul urged his readers in Rome to "be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Rom 12:2) and James wrote to the Jews scattered for their faith to "be sure you live out the message and do not merely listen to it and so deceive yourselves" (Jam 1:22).

These encouragements and commands were written to Christians and are still applicable to us today. The goal of our Bible study is not simply to master the text—to be able to quote Scripture perfectly and debate the finest points of theology—but rather for the text to master us, for our hearts and minds to be changed by it so that we would become like the Savior, Jesus Christ (Rom 8:29).

As he traveled and taught, Paul always kept in mind that one day he would stand before Jesus to give an account of himself and his work (2 Cor 5:9–10; Rom 14:12), and he wanted to do that well.

> "Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ." (Col 1:28)

> "The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith." (1 Tim 1:5)

Ultimately, God's goal for each of us is to spend this life getting to know Jesus better and love him more each day as we look forward to finally seeing him face to face.

> "If these things are really yours and are continually increasing, they will keep you from becoming ineffective and unproductive in your pursuit of knowing our Lord Jesus Christ more intimately." (2 Pet 1:8)

> "Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the honor both now and on that eternal day." (2 Pet 3:18)

Summary

There is a difference between interpretation/meaning and application. Every passage has only one legitimate meaning[2], yet that same passage may have infinite applications or potential responses. In our exegesis, our first responsibility is to discover the meaning of the passage, the single meaning that God intended when he wrote it. This meaning may come in the form of a clear narrative, story, or poetry or through an analogy or metaphor, but the form or genre does not determine the interpretation. A passage may also foreshadow a future application that a later writer sees (common when an NT writer refers to the OT) without abandoning the single meaning of the original passage.

Our second responsibility is to respond appropriately to that single meaning. Only once we know what a passage means can we determine our correct response. That response may or may not be the same as the original audience, but because "all Scripture is…profitable," a response is necessary.

Our response is based on our spiritual maturity and season of life, so maturing believers can return to the same passages time and time again to gain a greater understanding of how they apply at their current stage of life and

[2] You can review the "principle of single meaning" concept on page 60.

maturity. However, these future applications must still be based on the single meaning of the passage as uncovered by sound exegesis of the text.

John 15:1–17

How did this apply to the original audience?

In John 15:16, Jesus told the eleven apostles, "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that remains, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name he will give you."

While some teach that this means that Jesus chooses people to be saved, I don't think that's the meaning or the application here. The original audience was the eleven apostles. Jesus had chosen them specifically to be his apostles (Mark 3:13–19), and even though Judas had betrayed him, Jesus described the other eleven as having been cleaned (John 13:10–11; 15:3).

Thus, the message about choosing and appointing those men did not have to do with their salvation but with the ministry Jesus laid out for them, especially after his crucifixion. Not only can this not apply to my salvation, but it also does not apply to my ministry because I am not one of those eleven apostles.

Are there any timeless truths for me?

Even though I cannot use verse 16 to prove that I am chosen or appointed to serve in the church, Paul's doctrine of the Body of Christ and spiritual gifts certainly does teach that (1 Cor 12; Rom 12:6–8; Eph 4:11–16). Peter taught the same thing (1 Pet 4:10–11), so that doctrine is true.

Another timeless truth I find in this passage is that my fruitfulness is dependent on my humility and connection with the Savior and his Spirit. Paul taught this in Gal 5:16–23 and Eph 5:16–21, among other places, and John expanded on Jesus' theme of "abiding, remaining" by using the same word 24 times in his short letter of 1 John.

Do it Yourself

1. Review your passage and notes to see if you can identify at least one application that was specifically for the original audience and one timeless truth that is applicable still today.

2. Carefully consider, then write down one way you should respond to your passage based on your study and your current level of spiritual maturity.

PART THREE

10

Some natural conclusions

In chapter four, when discussing different methods people use to interpret the Bible, I wrote that the literal-grammatical-historical (LGH) hermeneutic

> is the only process that is thoroughly inductive rather than deductive, and it's the only one that—when used consistently in every passage of the Bible—keeps the interpreters (you and me) subject to the text instead of placing ourselves over it. In other words, the LGH method can be used objectively so that we stay in submission to the Scriptures and do not insert our own beliefs (no matter where they come from) into the text.

That was a bold statement, especially so early in this book, but I hope that you can see why I would say that, now that we have gone through the study process together. The goal of the ACTS method is to put our presuppositions aside and let the biblical text do the talking. When our presuppositions are wrong, we allow the Bible to correct us, rather than inserting our ideas into the text. This is the objectivity we want in our study.

Now, if everything I have presented so far is true—that there is only one meaning in any given passage and that the LGH method is the only one that lets the Bible speak for itself and present that single meaning—then it seems that there should be some natural conclusions that we should all see when we use this method consistently and faithfully. In this chapter, I want to explore some of those things that should naturally come to the surface over and over again as we study the Bible in this way. I will also offer a final warning and encouragement.

Four conclusions we must not miss

Ultimately, the Bible is what God has chosen to tell us. It includes information about himself, about us, about the future, etc., but as someone has cleverly pointed out, history is really "his story," the story of God at work.

As we read and study Scripture, there are at least four areas where this seems abundantly clear: God's purpose, God's method, God's people, and God's gift.

God's purpose

One of the most difficult things for a human to hear is, "It's not about you." Because of our sinful nature, we become prideful and selfish, tending to center things on ourselves. We must teach our children to share. We often have trouble giving because we do not want to end up having less than we need or want. And, at least in Western civilizations, we want a lot.

We see that this selfishness is the root of so many other kinds of sin. It is what caused our first parents to fall when God had given them only one law.

> "When the woman saw that the tree produced fruit that was good for food, was attractive to the eye, and was desirable for making one wise, she took some of its fruit and ate it." (Gen 3:6)

We see that the Enemy has continued to use the same attack throughout history.

> "Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him, because all that is in the world (the desire of the flesh and the desire of the eyes and the arrogance produced by material possessions) is not from the Father, but is from the world. And the world is passing away with all its desires, but the person who does the will of God remains forever." (1 John 2:15–17)

And Paul and Jesus both said that this desire for more pushes us away from God into self-inflicted pain.

> "Do not accumulate for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and devouring insect destroy and where thieves break in and steal. But accumulate for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and devouring insect do not destroy, and thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. … No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money." (Matt 6:19–21, 24)

> "Now godliness combined with contentment brings great profit. For we have brought nothing into this world and so we cannot take a single thing out either. But if we have food and shelter, we will be satisfied with that. Those who long to be rich, however, stumble into temptation and a trap and many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is the root of all evils. Some people in reaching for it have strayed from the faith and stabbed themselves with many pains." (1 Tim 6:6–10)

Contrary to our most basic desire, the Scriptures are clear that God's purpose in everything—the central theme of everything he does—is his own glory. Repeatedly throughout Scripture, he has called his people to live and act in a certain way based on his character.

> "You must be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy." (Lev 19:2)

> "Put on the new man who has been created in God's image—in righteousness and holiness that comes from truth." (Eph 4:24)

The reason he calls us to this is that he created us in his image (Gen 1:26–27; 9:6), and he is trying to make us (conform us, shape us) like himself. As we become like him, we start to think and act like him. His desires become our desires, his worldview becomes our worldview, and a major result of that is choosing to live for his glory.

The purpose of all things is God's glory. What God does is not the main story but part of the larger story of God's self-glorification. "For my sake alone I will act, for how can I allow my name to be defiled? I will not share my glory with anyone else!" (Isa 48:11)

Not only does he act this way himself, but he called us to do that same thing. "Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God." (1 Cor 10:31)

As we study the Bible, we should become aware that God's glory is central to everything. Even our salvation is not about us but about God. In Ephesians 1, the apostle Paul gave a great introduction to how the three members of the Trinity each play a role in salvation. As he did in creation, the Father made the plan, the Son implemented it, and the Spirit empowered it. But notice how Paul ended the three sections:

"to the praise of the glory of his grace" (Eph 1:6)

"to the praise of his glory" (Eph 1:12)

"to the praise of his glory" (Eph 1:14)

Did God love the world by sending Jesus to die as payment for sin so that people could be saved? Yes! (John 3:16; Rom 5:8) But that does not make humans the center of God's plan. His glory is central, even when he acts to save people. As the great hymn writer, Fannie Crosby, put it: "To God be the glory, great things he hath done!"

God's method

Understanding that God's glory is the central purpose of all things—the "why" of his actions—leads us to the next conclusion that Scripture presents.

How did God choose to act out his purpose? The Bible shows us three ways he has worked to make that happen.

Cumulative revelation

As I have mentioned several times throughout this book, we know that God did not give us all the information at one time. Instead, he dripped it out over 1500 years, using different writers and languages. Most scholars call this process "progressive revelation" because God gave his revelation progressively during that time.

However, as we noted in chapter three on Bible translations, words can have more than one meaning, depending on their context, and the term "progressive" can mean not only the passage of time but also a change in what is being discussed. Someone or something that makes progress is often not the same as when the process began. The whole point is to change into something better.

But God's revelation is perfect and cannot improve because God is perfect and cannot improve. In fact, if he changed at all he would become imperfect, but God has promised, "For I, the Lord, do not change" (Mal 3:6, NASB).

For this reason, some scholars have moved away from using the term "progressive" and prefer "cumulative revelation" instead. Unlike "progressive," *cumulative* does not mean "change," only "add or increase." In fact, not only does it not mean "change," it is often used to mean "strengthen what already exists" in cases like cumulative evidence where new evidence builds on what came previously without changing it.

As we study the Bible, we cannot escape the fact that new information is added and that it is based on the older information that came before it. It gives new details, new insights. It explains previous information in a way that we may not have expected. It shows that some things do change with time. But new revelation never overwrites or changes the revelation that came before it, and it never causes the previous revelation to mean something that it never originally meant. Every passage has only a single meaning that never changes.

No matter how much detail was added later, the newer information builds on the older without changing its truth or meaning in any way.

Dispensationalism

Dispensationalism* is a theological system that requires and comes as a result of the LGH hermeneutic. There are many books written on this topic, but I highly recommend *Dispensationalism* by Charles Ryrie and *What is Dispensationalism?* edited by Paul Miles.

The Koine Greek word behind "dispensation" simply means "rule of the house." The Bible clearly shows that God has worked with different people in various ways throughout history. In short, seeing creation as God's house, he has ruled people differently at different times. This is based on the revelation they had at the time and the commands or laws that God gave them. This is no different than parents who rule their children differently based on age, location, gender, and culture. In one home, there may be different rules for different children, depending on their ages and levels of maturity. Each of these different ways of ruling the home is a dispensation, and recognizing these dispensations helps us determine how to appropriately respond to the truth of Scripture.

In one sense, everyone is a dispensationalist, whether they admit it or not. For example, according to Genesis 2:25 and 3:7, it seems that our first parents spent their lives without clothing. It was not until after they sinned that they found something to cover themselves. In nearly every civilization today, people wear clothing of some kind. Even the most isolated people groups usually wear something around their mid-sections to cover their most private parts. Reading further in Genesis 3 we find that it was God himself who provided clothing for Adam and Eve (3:21), more than the leaves they sewed together initially. So, if you wear clothes, you recognize there is a difference in the way God ruled before sin and after sin.

Other examples are easily found throughout the Bible. The way God ruled Israel with the law of Moses—the clothes they wore, the food they ate, and the weekly and annual schedules they followed—is not how God rules people

today. The way God personally walked and talked with Abraham (Gen 18) and the apostles (after Jesus' incarnation) is vastly different than how he indwells each believer now (John 14:15–21; Gal 2:20; Eph 1:13–14). Even within the New Testament, we see that how Jesus is going to bring punishment on this world, and later rule as king in Jerusalem, is definitely not what we see happening today (Rev 6–20).

For more information about dispensations, see the appendix, which is a reprint of my chapter "What are dispensations?" from the book *What is Dispensationalism?*

Covenants

One of the ways that God worked with different people throughout history was by making covenants. A covenant is a type of formal contract that usually includes two parts: the actions that one or more parties must accomplish and the benefits or punishments that will result from fulfilling or not fulfilling those actions. In some of God's covenants, he is the only one required to accomplish an action, so we call these covenants "unconditional." Because God is trustworthy, if he promises to do something, we know that he will do it. Therefore, the person or group with whom he made the covenant can trust that it will certainly happen as God promised. These covenants are usually very simple, with God stating, "I will," and nothing can change that.

A "conditional" covenant is one where both God and humans are required to act. In this case, even though God cannot go back on his promise, humans often do, so the results are based on whether they uphold their side of the agreement. The language in this type of covenant is usually something like, "If you do…then I will…" Sometimes the opposite result is also included: "If you do not…then I will…" do something else.

While the Bible speaks of many covenants that people made with each other, the Bible records six major covenants that God made with people.[1] Five

[1] There is an entire theological system called Covenant Theology that is built on covenants that are not actually found in Scripture. It is an unfortunate name because

of these covenants are unconditional; only one is conditional. Of the five unconditional covenants, only one is with all creation. The other four are with the nation of Israel only. The sole conditional covenant was also with Israel only, but they did not fulfill their side, so that covenant is no longer in effect. The following list is a summary of these six biblical covenants.[2]

1. **Noahic Covenant.** God made an unconditional covenant with all creation that he would never again destroy the earth with a flood (Gen 8:20–22; 9:8–17).

2. **Abrahamic Covenant.** God made an unconditional covenant that he would make Abraham into a great nation (Gen 12:2). This nation would include a great number of people, its own territory, a formal government, and a national religion, as outlined in later covenants. This covenant is not for all Abraham's descendants, as it was passed down only through one son, Isaac (Gen 17:19, 21), and one grandson, Jacob (Gen 28:10–15). Jacob's sons became the tribes of Israel, so this covenant is only for the nation of Israel.[3]

3. **Mosaic Covenant.** God made a conditional covenant with Israel when they were camped at Mount Sinai (Ex 24:3–8) and later before he led them into the land of Canaan (Deut 28–29). He promised to bless them with physical health and prosperity if they obeyed him and punish

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it misleads people into thinking that it is a biblical system when, in fact, it is very unbiblical and teaches much false doctrine. For a good refutation to Covenant Theology, see the appropriate sections in the two books I mentioned under "Dispensationalism."

Some dispensational scholars see other potential covenants in Scripture (sometimes called "Edenic" and "Adamic"), but those are also more theological than biblical and are not stated as clearly and definitively as the ones I explain here, so I am not including them.

[2] In addition to these, God made priestly covenants with Aaron and his descendants (Num 18:19) and Phineas, one of Aaron's grandsons, and his descendants (Num 25:1–13).

[3] You can read more detail about these covenants with Israel in my chapter "How Do Covenants Relate to the Kingdom?" in *What is Dispensationalism?*

them with famine, drought, sickness, war, and exile if they rebelled. They broke this Old Covenant and suffered everything God promised.

4. **Land Covenant.** As part of the Abrahamic Covenant, a nation needs its own territory, and God gave Abraham the physical boundaries of that land (Gen 15:18–21). Later, he promised that, even though Israel would rebel and be carried away from their land, he would bring them back, and they would never be oppressed there again (Deut 30:1–10). This is repeated many times throughout the Old Testament and will be fulfilled in the Millennial Kingdom.

5. **Davidic Covenant.** As part of the Abrahamic Covenant, a nation needs a formal government. God promised that the government he would give them would be a monarchy through the family line of King David (2 Sam 7:8–16). Jesus will fulfill this covenant when he rules from David's throne in Jerusalem during the Millennial Kingdom (Luke 1:30–33).

6. **New Covenant.** As part of the Abrahamic Covenant, a nation needs a national religion.[4] God promised that, even though Israel broke their Old Covenant, he would make a New Covenant with them that they could not break because it would be unconditional (Jer 31:31–34; Ezek 36:24–36). During the Millennial Kingdom, Israel will worship the true and living God exclusively and perfectly. They will finally be his people, and he will be their God forever.

God's people

As you can see from the previous section, the nation of Israel is special to God. He made promises to Abraham and to Israel that can never be voided or

[4] While this is not something most of us think about today, every ancient civilization had its own gods and religion, and when God made his covenant with Abraham, he would have expected his nation to have the same thing. The promises God made through the Hebrew prophets confirm this.

changed. This is almost universally agreed upon by biblical teachers. However, the question arises, "How does the church fit into that?"

Some scholars believe that the church is a continuation of Israel. They believe that there is and has always been only one special people of God that includes all believers of any dispensation. In this scenario, whether you call that group "God's people," "Israel" (sometimes "true" or "spiritual" Israel), or "the church" doesn't matter. We're all God's people. They conclude that whatever God promised to Israel in the past will be fulfilled and enjoyed by the church as well. Unfortunately, they often see God's promises as spiritual blessings rather than physical blessings, so they reject the doctrine of a literal future kingdom. Reformed Theology and Roman Catholicism are two examples of groups holding to this doctrine.

Others see a little bit of a distinction, stating that since Israel rejected Jesus as their Messiah, God has replaced them with the church. Like the first group, these scholars believe that the physical blessings that God promised Israel are enjoyed by Christians today either as physical blessings (such as charismatic groups that emphasize miracles, healings, etc.) or as spiritual blessings (usually non-charismatics). Rather than completely rejecting a literal future Millennial kingdom, some who hold this position believe that Jesus will still come to reign on the Earth, but they are divided as to how much of a role Israel will have at that time. However, they all usually see a spiritual form of the kingdom already in effect in the church, whether there is a literal future kingdom or not. Many Protestant denominations hold to some form of this belief, as seen in the music and sermons focused on doing kingdom work today and the description of the kingdom as being "already but not yet" in so-called "Progressive" Dispensationalism.[5]

However, when we consistently use the LGH hermeneutic in every passage of the Old and New Testaments, we discover that God has two unique

[5] Progressive Dispensationalism should not be confused with the dispensationalism described above. Although it uses the same name, it is more like Covenant Theology than Dispensational Theology and uses the term "progressive" to show that it is a departure from true, biblical dispensationalism.

people groups—Israel and the church—with several clear differences and that we must observe a clear and complete distinction between them as we study and respond to Scripture. Here is a brief list of some of the differences between the two groups:

1. Israel is an ethnic people group; the church is made up of people from every ethnic group.
2. Israel began with Abraham's great-grandsons, the sons of Jacob, around 1800 BC; the church began on the day of Pentecost in AD 33.
3. A person is a Jew through physical birth; a person becomes a Christian through spiritual birth.
4. God made many physical promises to Israel based on their obedience; God made many spiritual promises to Christians, some that are based on obedience, some that are not.
5. God made specific covenants with Israel which will be fulfilled in the Millennium; God has made no covenants with the church.
6. Israel was given the Law of Moses; the church was given the law of Christ (1 Cor 9:21).
7. Israel is described as God's wife (Jer 3:1–11); the church is described as the Body of Christ, and individual Christians are adopted into his family as his children (1 Cor 12:12–13; Col 1:18; Rom 8:15–16).
8. Israel will be remembered eternally with their tribal names engraved onto the gates of the New Jerusalem (Rev 21:12–13); the church will be remembered eternally with the names of the twelve apostles engraved on the foundations of the New Jerusalem (Rev 21:14).

This is just a small sample of the differences that you will find as you continue to study the Bible. When we approach the Bible without the presupposition that there is only one people of God, it becomes clear that God has two distinct groups, and our response to the commands and the promises should be different when we remember to which group God gave those commands and promises.

God's gift

Several times throughout Scripture we find that God had a plan to save people from sin even before Adam rebelled against God. Ephesians 1:4 states that God chose his people in Christ "before the foundation of the world."[6] The best translations of Revelation 13:8 state that Jesus was the lamb "slain from the foundation of the world."[7] Finally, in Romans 3:24–26, Paul points out that God "passed over the sins previously committed," instead of judging them in the past, as he waited until just the right time when he would send Jesus to pay for all sin (Gal 4:4).

Although some people accuse dispensationalism of teaching that God has a different method of salvation in each dispensation, that is not true. Not only do the writings of solid dispensational scholars not teach that, but neither does the Bible. Anyone who handles the Bible carefully and consistently with the LGH hermeneutic discovers that God's method of salvation has been the same from the very beginning.

> *Salvation has always been a gift of God, accessible only through personal faith in God and what he revealed at that time*

Let's examine the three parts of that definition. Salvation "has always been a gift of God." The word we usually use to describe this is "grace." In its most basic, ancient usage, the Greek word *charis* (χάρις) refers to a person's generosity, their generous character. It is not so much about what the person gives

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[6] The "us" is debated in this verse. Some people think it refers to the nation of Israel. Others believe it refers to the church. Both perspectives have good arguments to support them. Many people believe this means that God selected individual people to be saved, but this has no basis anywhere in Scripture and definitely not in this verse.

[7] Many translations rearrange the word order to make it say that names are written in the book from the foundation of the world so that it matches Rev 17:8. The Greek text of Rev 13:8 does not say that but Rev 17:8 does.

but the heart behind the giving. When we say that God is gracious, we are speaking of his overwhelming generosity. It is clear how this applies to salvation when we see passages like these.

> "For this is the way God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world should be saved through him."
> (John 3:16–17)

> "For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. (For rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person perhaps someone might possibly dare to die.) But God demonstrates his own love for us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Rom 5:6–8)

> "(My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin.) But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the Righteous One, and he himself is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for our sins but also for the whole world." (1 John 2:1–2)

To say that God is generous is an understatement. He gives eternal salvation as a free gift to anyone and everyone who believes because Jesus died for us and paid for our sins, long before most of us were even born. Paul was adamant that there is nothing we can do to earn God's gift.

> "But God, **being rich in mercy because of his great love with which he loved us**, even though we were dead in offenses, made us alive together with Christ—**by grace you are saved!**—and he raised us up together with him and seated us together with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, to demonstrate in the coming ages **the surpassing wealth of his grace in kindness toward us** in Christ Jesus. For **by grace you are saved** through faith, and **this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God; it is not from works**, so that no one can boast." (Eph 2:4–9)

The second part of the definition says that salvation is "accessible only through personal faith." Salvation is a gift that God offers, but he does not force it on a person. Each person is required to accept it for himself or herself. The way we do this is through faith.

The Greek word translated "faith" is *pistis* (πίστις), which means "belief, faith, or trust." These English words are interchangeable in the New Testament and are used both as nouns and verbs. When a person "believes" in Jesus, they are placing their "faith" in him and "trusting" that he alone can save them from sin and condemnation. Even though salvation is a gift, there is still something a person must do: believe.

> So then they said to him, "What must we do to accomplish the deeds God requires?" Jesus replied, "This is the deed God requires—to **believe in the one whom he sent**." (John 6:28–29)
>
> "The one who **believes in him is not condemned**. The one who does not believe has been condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the one and only Son of God." (John 3:18)
>
> "Now Jesus performed many other miraculous signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are recorded so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that **by believing you may have life** in his name." (John 20:30–31)
>
> Calling for lights, the jailer rushed in and fell down trembling at the feet of Paul and Silas. Then he brought them outside and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They replied, "**Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved**, you and your household."
> (Acts 16:29–31)

That brings us back to the accusation against dispensationalism. We agree that a person today has to place their faith in Jesus to be saved, but what about those who lived before Jesus? Did God have a different method of salvation for them? Again, the answer is no. Salvation has always been a gift of God

accessible only through personal faith, but what a person had to believe has both changed and remained unchanged throughout history. Let me explain what I mean.

Paul built his doctrine of salvation in Romans 4 on one key Old Testament verse: "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness" (Rom 4:3; Gen 15:6). His point was clear: Abraham's salvation was given by God because Abraham believed, exactly what we have already seen throughout the New Testament passages above. But Abraham could not have believed in Jesus 2,000 years before Jesus' birth, so what did he believe? Fortunately, Paul gave us this answer as well, at the end of the same chapter: "He was fully convinced that **what God promised he was also able to do**. So indeed it was credited to Abraham as righteousness." (Rom 4:21–22)

Abraham did not have to believe in Jesus because God had not revealed that to him. However, when we believe in Jesus, we exercise the same faith that Abraham had—faith in God and his character.

If you think about it from an unbeliever's viewpoint, the gospel is rather silly. Do you really believe that an ancient Jewish rabbi, who died as a political criminal with the charge of treason against Rome, is the only way a person can escape eternal punishment? The answer is yes; yes, we do believe that. The good news of salvation is that God planned to have Jesus take the punishment we deserve so that his infinite and perfect justice would be satisfied. In return, when we place our belief/faith/trust in him, he will give us forgiveness and eternal life, which is an ongoing, growing relationship with him.

The fact that it sounds silly is exactly what makes faith work. God made some promises to Abraham, and Abraham chose to believe that God was trustworthy and would fulfill those promises. God has promised us that he will accept Jesus' death and resurrection as our substitute, and when we place our faith in Jesus, what we are saying is that we believe that he is trustworthy and will not surprise us later with new charges that we have to pay for. We are taking him at his word that Jesus is enough.

So, in one sense, what a person has to believe has changed. Abraham didn't know about Jesus, but we do, and we have to believe whatever God has revealed to us at different points in history.

At the same time, what a person must believe has not changed. We have always been expected to place our full faith/trust in God himself and his unchanging character. No matter what he promises, no matter what information he has chosen to reveal, we must choose to trust him completely, and it is through that faith that we receive for ourselves the free gift that he offers every single person. I sincerely hope and pray that you have come to that belief yourself and accepted Jesus' death and resurrection as your only way to the true and living God.

A final warning and encouragement

I have spent this book attempting to show you that understanding the Bible is not nearly as difficult as it sometimes seems to be. The reality is that our presuppositions, our church backgrounds, and sometimes our own pride are what often make it difficult to understand or accept. God gave us the Bible so that we could understand it and submit to it.

However, it's also true that some passages in the Bible and some doctrines are more difficult than others. Godly scholars debate different sides of important doctrines because they are firmly and honestly convinced that their conclusion is what the Bible teaches, and while we may disagree with them on these issues, we certainly would not accuse them of intentionally promoting false doctrine simply because we see things differently.

So, what do we do with those passages that seem to contradict each other or divide people with far more education than we have? I believe the answer still lies within the LGH method.

I remember eating breakfast with a pastor friend of mine who holds to Covenant Theology. In his theological tradition, there is no distinction between Israel and the church, so he rejects the doctrines of the rapture of the church and a literal future kingdom where Jesus will reign on earth, among other

things. Unlike most people with whom I debate and discuss these differences, he readily admitted, "I know that we disagree because of our hermeneutics. I don't take those passages literally like you do." I appreciated his honesty and told him so. However, he said, "If you're right about the rapture, and I'm wrong, I won't argue with you as we go up!"

Sadly, not all these debates are as friendly as that one. I'm sure you have heard about churches and even families torn apart by arguments over Calvinism, speaking in tongues, how long creation took, and other divisive topics.[8] But let me encourage you that everyone runs into difficulties in their study. If you are studying a passage and find it hard to understand, that's okay. Don't get frustrated. Give it all your effort anyway. When you begin to test your conclusions by reading commentaries, you may find that you are not alone, that many people wrestle with the same passage. Press on. Press on in your study. Press on in your growth. And, most of all, submit and respond to what you do understand and trust that God will bless you for it.

Summary

We have seen that when we use the literal-grammatical-historical hermeneutic consistently in every passage of Scripture and do not read our presuppositions and theologies into the text, certain things naturally come out of the text. These are doctrines that should lay the foundation for everything else we learn and believe because they permeate the Scriptures. Everything is for and about God and his glory. He has worked in specific ways throughout history to reveal himself and his plan, focusing especially on Israel and the church. And he has offered his gift of salvation to everyone who places their trust in him.

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[8] If these topics are unfamiliar to you, that's fine, but I assure you that the more committed you are to Bible study, the more these will show up and you will have to deal with them. Part of the ministry at Theology is for Everyone and the International Society for Biblical Hermeneutics is to answer questions like these using the LGH hermeneutic and the method outlined in this book. Feel free to ask questions using the forms on our respective websites.

This doesn't mean that it's always easy or that every doctrine will make sense right away. Studying the Bible is a lifelong process, but the growth that we experience as we wrestle with the text should add to its sweetness when we finally do understand what we did not before.

Another way to say this is that, when we embrace the Bible as God's authoritative revelation of himself to humanity, it should lead us to completely submit ourselves to him and the Scriptures. The Bible is God's word, and it carries his authority. This is the reason for step four in our process; our response to our study is to submit ourselves to what we have learned through our study, and it is why we must be so careful to study it properly.

Do it Yourself

Review your passage one more time. Is there anything that fits into these "natural conclusions" now that you see them? Is there anything you learned that made you think, "Of course! Why didn't I see that before? It's so obvious!"

11

Two more ways to study

Most of this book has presented only one way to study the Bible—a thorough look at every detail in a passage based on the literal-grammatical-historical hermeneutic. I've repeatedly said that this is the best way to get everything we can from the text, and I continue to believe that is true. However, it's not the **only** way to study the Bible. In fact, two other important methods work together, built on the foundation that you gain from your detailed, exegetical study.

Imagine that you like to study trees. You know the different types and can tell them apart by their size, color, location, etc. Now, imagine that you go to a forest for the first time. You have never been there and know nothing of the trees that are there. If you wanted to do a thorough study of the forest and create a report, there are at least three different methods you should use.

First, you may go on the internet to see if there are any pictures or satellite images from above. Or you may go to the forest with a drone, so you can fly through and look at the whole thing. You might create rough maps based on a bird's-eye view of the entire forest.

Second, once you have an idea of what the forest contains, you will probably want to go into the forest and examine the trees themselves. You would look at the leaves and the bark and take extensive notes about what you find. You may have to research some things that you've never seen before; there may even be types of trees that you did not know existed.

Finally, as you build your report on the forest, you will probably create a way to catalog your findings. You might talk about the different areas of the forest with several types of trees growing together, or you might focus on the categories of the trees, no matter where they are located in the forest.

Your final report will be better because you used all three methods to examine the forest, but notice that your initial overview and final catalog would mean very little if it were not for the details in the middle.

In the same way, there are three ways to approach your Bible study—survey, exegesis, and topical—and the exegesis that you have been doing is critical to accurately put the surveys and topics together. In this chapter, we will see how to take the information you have gathered and put it into surveys and topical studies.

Bible surveys

There is an English idiom that warns a person not to "miss the forest for the trees." Using our example from above, to "miss the forest" means that our researcher spent so much time looking at leaves and bark that they overlooked the beauty and grandeur of the forest. In Bible study, sometimes we get so caught up looking at individual words and verses that we forget to connect them to the "forest," the entire Bible, the context. When this happens, we inevitably start building incomplete, and even false, doctrine. Every heresy and false teaching has begun with a person or group focusing so narrowly that they miss the bigger picture. This is where Bible surveys can help because Bible surveys ask, **"How does the whole Bible fit together?"**

With our forest, we could conduct a survey by looking at pictures on the internet that people have taken from airplanes, drones, or satellites. We would have to take into consideration how old the pictures were (has the forest changed?), what time of year the pictures were taken (things may look different in different seasons), and the equipment used to take the pictures (some equipment is better than others).

Another option would be to take the pictures yourself from an airplane or drone. By doing this, you are in control of making sure that you get all the pictures from different angles, at different times of day, at different times of the year, and from different heights so that your information is as accurate as

possible. You would want to use different camera lenses to give you every possible shot to help you see the whole forest accurately.

Read the Bible

In the same way, many Bible surveys have already been done that you can use as resources in your study. But you can also build your own. The easiest way to do this is to simply **read the Bible quickly**. Some people like to read through the Bible every year. On my website, I have a few reading plans that are even shorter than that to help you focus on large sections of Scripture very quickly.[1]

The key to this is remembering that you are doing an overview, not a deep study. You want to read large chunks at a time. That may be just one chapter, but many books are so short that you can read them in one sitting. I recommend that you do not break up any book that has six chapters or fewer. Read the whole thing at once. In the New Testament, many of these are letters, so they are meant to be read in their entirety, not broken down into word studies and outlines. The original audience would have loved to receive a letter from an apostle and would probably have read it many times.

That brings up another part of Bible surveys: **read the Bible repeatedly**. If the Christians in Philippi probably read Paul's letter over and over again, we should, too. Philippians is a short letter with only four chapters. Even someone who reads slowly can get through it in one sitting. And if you read the letter to the Philippians once each day for a week, I promise that you will have a much better understanding of it than if you used only the ACTS method because reading it those seven times helps you see the entire forest. When Paul told them to not be anxious in chapter four, you will immediately connect it to his strange attitude in prison from chapter one because you read chapter one just a few minutes ago.

Now, this doesn't mean that you can throw away the ACTS method. As you read quickly, you will ask questions that you cannot answer immediately.

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[1] You can find some Bible reading plans at theologyisforeveryone.com/resources.

Stopping to answer those questions is like landing your drone and walking into the forest—you stop looking at the forest and start looking at the trees. Instead, as you fly over a book of the Bible, keep your notebook handy. Write down your questions and observations but keep going. Don't stop your reading to answer the questions. By writing them down, you know that you can come back to them later when you are ready to do a more in-depth study. But by doing the survey first, you will be less likely to miss the broad connections when you come back to focus on the details.

Types of Bible surveys

There are many different ways to get an overview of the Bible. In the previous section, I talked more about individual book surveys than true Bible surveys, but the same principles apply. Here are four ways to get an overview of the Bible or large sections of the Bible.

Book surveys

As we saw above, surveying one book of the Bible at a time is a good way to get an overview of the entire Bible. There are 66 books and many of them are short enough to read in one day. Even some of the longer books (Genesis, Isaiah, Jeremiah, etc.) can easily be read in a week if you cover just ten chapters per day. If you read one or two books per week (and read shorter books multiple times in a week), you will have read the entire Bible in less than one year.

If you have never read that much of the Bible, you may want to start slower. You can accomplish the same goal of reading the entire Bible in a year or less by reading just four chapters per day every day. Some people find that daunting, so if you read only five days per week, you can do it with only six chapters per day.

My recommendation is that every Christian should read the entire gospel of John once a week for five weeks. That requires only three chapters each day. After you are finished, I recommend that you move to 1 John and read that once per day (all five chapters) for five days. Together, these two books form

the foundation of our Christian faith and practice from the words of Jesus himself and his closest friend.

Chronological

Another method to get an overview of the entire Bible is to read it chronologically. This is especially helpful because we often miss historical connections. The LGH method insists that we take into consideration the historical audiences and their situations. This means that we must understand, for example, when the Hebrew prophets lived and wrote. Israel's history is recorded in the books of Samuel and Kings (Chronicles is a later repetition of those books from a slightly different perspective), but in our English Bibles, the prophetic books are far removed from Samuel and Kings.

Chronological surveys help us read the Bible more carefully by learning and remembering that Zechariah wrote 200 years after Isaiah, that the book of Ezra has an 80-year gap between chapters five and six, and that the book of Esther took place during that gap.

We find the same thing in the New Testament. Luke recorded the first 30 years of church history in the book of Acts (AD 33–64). It was during that time that Paul wrote most of his letters (not in the order they are placed in our Bibles), and James and Mattew wrote as well. By understanding when Paul wrote and why he wrote what he did and when he did it, we gain a better understanding of Paul, his audiences, and the church at large during this time.

In the Select Bibliography at the end of this book, I have included some Bible survey books that can help you learn the chronology of the Bible. I also have a reading plan on my website that will lead you chronologically through the Old Testament, keeping things together as they happened historically.

Covenants

In the previous chapter, we saw that one of God's methods is to make covenants with different people or groups. One method of seeing an overview

of the Bible is to look for when these covenants were made, when they began (or will begin), and the people with whom they were made.

For example, the Mosaic Covenant was made with Israel only, and it spans from about Exodus 20 until Jesus' crucifixion at the end of the gospels. Keeping this in mind helps us understand why the prophets seemed so harsh at certain times but not others. It helps us remember that the promises in the Psalms and Proverbs were for that nation living under the Mosaic Law when God promised blessing for obedience and suffering for disobedience. That covenant and those promises were never made to Christians.

Dispensations

Much like the covenants help us remember what promises God has made to certain people, the dispensations help us read the Bible within the context of how God was working with certain people at certain times in history. We must not assume David knew as much as Paul, and we must remember how little information the Hebrew prophets had compared to what John saw in the Revelation. At the same time, we must read the Revelation in light of what God told the prophets would come, even if their understanding was incomplete.

Surveying the Bible through the dispensations is a little more useful than using just the covenants because the dispensations cover all of human history (Genesis through Revelation), while the covenants are scattered throughout, but both add value to our understanding of the Bible as a whole.

For more information about the dispensations, see the appendix entitled, "What are dispensations?" beginning on page 165.

Topical studies

If a Bible survey asks how the Bible fits together as a whole, topical studies ask, "What does the whole Bible say about this topic, category, or doctrine?" In our forest example, our report may categorize the trees of the forest into families like hardwood and softwood, or we may discuss types like oak, maple, and elm. Another way to categorize our trees could be to show which

trees thrive at higher elevations versus those that need lower elevations. Certain trees are not in our forest at all because they need a warm climate, but this is a cold climate forest. Our categories could go on and on, and this is a great way to study the Bible.

Let's move away from the forest and imagine a bookcase in your home, office, or library. Right now, that bookcase is empty; there are many shelves, but the shelves have no labels and nothing sitting on them. The purpose of a topical study is to label and fill the shelves. Our goal is to group similar items on one shelf so we can find them in the future when we need them. So, maybe you plan to label your shelves "Cookbooks," "Science Fiction," "Bible commentaries," and "History." As you sort through your books, looking at the titles and contents, you decide where they belong and place them on the appropriate shelves.

Theology

One of the most important reasons to do topical studies is so that we can build our theology. The Bible contains approximately 31,000 verses. Each of these speaks to one or more topics, like God, sin, Israel, and the future. If I wanted to know what the Bible says about grace, I would need to read the entire Bible, write down every verse that mentions grace, and take notes about what it says about grace. When I am done with that, and only once I have reviewed all 31,000 verses, can I accurately say, "This is what the Bible teaches about grace." Then I can move on to other topics like love or the end times.

Now, if that sounds like a lot of work, you're right, and this is where these two other types of study can help. As you work through your passage and take notes about what the text is saying, begin cataloging the verses. Verse one speaks about God; verse two speaks about sin; and so on. Start a different notebook with several blank pages dedicated to each topic. As you study one passage after another, as you read quickly through different books, you will be amazed to see how the Bible connects. You will notice connections between passages that you may have never noticed before. The New Testament writers

quote the Old Testament thousands of times, and that is important for understanding what they wanted to teach.

To build your theology of the Bible, I recommend starting with eleven blank pages—eleven empty shelves on your bookcase—because there are eleven major doctrines, and every verse in the Bible speaks about one or more of those doctrines. Here are the major doctrines followed by the theological name that scholars use to refer to them, a brief description, and a few examples to help you start filling your empty pages.

1. **The Bible** ("Bibliology"). The study of what the Bible says about itself. (Ps 19:7–11; 2 Tim 3:16–17)
2. **God the Father** ("Theology Proper"). The study of God the Father specifically ("Paterology") and things related to the entire Godhead, like creation and God's attributes. (Gen 1:1; Rev 4:3)
3. **God the Son** ("Christology"). The study of Jesus, both in the Old Testament before his incarnation, and in the New Testament. (Ex 3:2; John 1:1–3)
4. **God the Spirit** ("Pneumatology"). The study of the Holy Spirit. (Gen 1:2; Acts 2:4).
5. **Angels** ("Angelology"). The study of angels, including holy angels, demons, and Satan. (Job 38:7; Matt 8:32–33; Rev 12:9).
6. **Humans** ("Anthropology"). The study of humanity, including our creation, nature, and future. (Gen 1:26; Eccl 12:13; Rom 14:12).
7. **Sin** ("Hamartiology"). The study of everything the Bible says about sin (Gen 6:5; Rom 3:23).
8. **Salvation** ("Soteriology"). The study of how God saves people (Isa 53:6; Acts 4:12).
9. **Israel** ("Israelology"). The study of the past, present, and future of the nation of Israel (Gen 12:2; Rom 11:25; Rev 21:12).
10. **The Church** ("Ecclesiology"). The study of the church. This is the only doctrine that is limited to the New Testament (Matt 16:18; Eph 1:22–23).

11. **End Times** ("Eschatology"). The study of all future events, prophecy not yet fulfilled (Dan 7:13–14; 1 Thess 4:13–18; Rev 4:1).

If you looked at the verses included with each doctrine, you probably noticed that there is some overlap. For example, because Jesus is the only one who can save us from our sin, you would include Isaiah 53:6 and Acts 4:12 under both Christology and Soteriology. Further, Isaiah 53:6 tells us that "the LORD" caused our sin to be placed on Jesus, meaning that we should put that verse in our Theology Proper section as well.

By intentionally adding verses to these categories as you go about your regular reading and study, you will begin to fill your theological bookcase, seeing how these important topics are handled as God gave new revelation. Each shelf will gain more items as you study. Some shelves may be a little empty for a while, and that's okay. You will also build a **cross-reference*** index where you can see what passages refer to one another within specific topics.

As you add verses to your categories, you can even create sections for subcategories. Rather than putting all verses about angels on one page, maybe you have separate pages for holy angels, demons, and Satan. Maybe under Theology Proper, you have one page dedicated to God's attributes or characteristics like love, grace, omniscience, and unchangeableness (also called "immutability"). The possibilities are endless as you grow in your knowledge of God's Word!

Other types of topical studies

Theology is not the only way to categorize the Bible. As you study you might find yourself grouping passages in other ways. Here are some ideas to get you started.

Genealogies. While they may not be the most exciting parts to read, God intentionally listed families for a reason, and part of the fun is discovering why they are there. Matthew 1 is a great example that should send you running back to your Old Testament.

People. Sometimes called "character studies," these could be considered either surveys or topical studies. As you read, list every verse or passage that mentions the person you want to know more about. You might be surprised at how often some Old Testament people are mentioned in the New Testament.

Attributes of God. I mentioned this above, but it is worth putting it here again. There are certain characteristics that only God has—all-knowing ("omniscience"), eternality, and transcendence, for example. But, because humans are created in God's image, he has some attributes that he shares with us (even though we exercise them imperfectly), such as holiness, justice, and truth. A study of what God has revealed in the Bible about his attributes not only helps us to know him better but also to better know ourselves and his design for us.

Prophecies. In the same way that the covenants and dispensations give us an overview of the Bible and how God works, a study of biblical prophecy can be enlightening. This is different than Eschatology ("end times") because this study would include all prophecies, both fulfilled and unfulfilled, and can include true and false prophets, whereas Eschatology includes only those things that are still future.

Summary

While the ACTS method is essential for interpreting and responding to the Bible accurately and appropriately, it also gives us the tools to study the Bible in other ways, helping us see the bigger picture of how it all fits together.

In your study, be sure to approach the Bible in multiple ways, from different angles, and be careful that you do not build your belief system from just one type of study or just one passage. Let the whole Bible inform your theology, and you will be a better person and a better Christian because of it.

Epilogue

What's next?

I don't know what you expected when you first picked up this book, but if you made it all the way through, and especially if you used the workbook features to study a passage, then let me say "thank you" and "well done." My goal has been to help you grow in your appreciation and understanding of the Scriptures and the God who gave them to us.

So, what's next? Where do you go from here? If you're using this as a class textbook, you will move on to other classes. I pray that the practices you learned here will make those better.

I believe that many of you are not in Bible school, not students in a formal sense. Your goal was to learn without having to sit in a classroom, and I hope this has helped you do that. At Theology is for Everyone, I have other resources available that you may find useful in your continued study and growth.

On my website are video courses covering hermeneutics, theological topics, and books of the Bible. You can subscribe to my email newsletter and be notified when new courses become available.

I also suggest my three-volume commentary on the entire Bible. My *Chapter by Chapter* series provides a summary of every chapter using the inductive and LGH methods presented in this book and is easy to read along with your Bible. My book, *Biblical Discipleship*, is the culmination of 20 years of work on how people grow and how we help others grow. Each chapter includes study questions at the end and is perfect for small groups and classes.

Appendix:
What are dispensations?[1]

Whenever the topic of dispensations and dispensationalism comes up, many people seem to want to discuss one primary question: How many dispensations are there? How one person answers that question has become almost a litmus test to determine just how "dispensational" he is. In his authoritative book, *Dispensationalism*, Charles Ryrie showed that people have tried for more than 400 years to answer this question and he included a chart showing seven of the most popular systems over the centuries.[2]

Unfortunately, there is another question that is much more important, yet often overlooked. That question is the subject of this chapter: What *is* a dispensation? The number of dispensations a person finds will be based, primarily, on what he understands a dispensation to be.

In the 20th century, the most popular system was developed and presented by C. I. Scofield in the *Scofield Reference Bible*. This system taught that each dispensation included new revelation from God, human responsibility based on that revelation, human failure to fulfill that responsibility, and God's judgment because of the failure. This formed the "traditional" seven-dispensation system held by many people today. Notice the following quotes from Scofield and Lewis Sperry Chafer.

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[1] This content was previously published as "Chapter 3: What are Dispensations?" in *What is Dispensationalism?*, ed. Paul Miles, published by Grace Abroad Ministries, 2018. Used with permission.

[2] Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism, Revised and Expanded* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2007), 81.

> A dispensation is a period of time during which man is **tested** in respect of obedience to some ***specific*** **revelation** of the will of God. Seven such dispensations are distinguished in Scripture.[3] (italics original; boldface added)

> Each dispensation, therefore, begins with man being divinely placed in a **new position of privilege and responsibility**, and each closes with the **failure of man** resulting in righteous **judgment from God**.[4] (boldface added)

While this definition has been extremely helpful for many people, it does have its weaknesses. First, this definition sees each dispensation as a self-contained unit which does not overlap with any others. Another drawback is that it does not handle the time periods between dispensations very well. Most scholars admit that there are short periods of time between several of the dispensations which act as transitions between one dispensation and the next. These are difficult to explain under every definition, but especially with Scofield's.

Scofield's definition is not the only one offered, though. Christopher Cone, another major dispensational thinker, defines a dispensation as a specific way that God works to glorify Himself.

> A dispensation is a particularly distinctive economy or administration in and by which God demonstrates or expresses His own glory.[5]

While we certainly agree that God's glory is central to everything, this definition seems to be too broad as Scofield's is too narrow. Cone concludes

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[3] From the original *Scofield Reference Bible*. Quoted in Ryrie, 27.

[4] Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Major Bible Themes*, rev. John F. Walvoord (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1974), 127.

[5] Christopher Cone, *Prolegomena on Biblical Hermeneutics and Method*, 2nd edition (Hurst, TX: Tyndale Seminary Press, 2012), 305.

that his definition "seems to unveil no less than 12 dispensational divisions," which extend into both eternity past and future.[6]

Finding a middle ground

A simpler way to define "dispensation" is to use the natural meaning of the Greek word, *oikonomia* (οἰκονομία), which means "administration" like of a household or "management."[7] From this word, Ryrie concluded that a "dispensation is a distinguishable economy in the outworking of God's purpose."[8] In other words, a dispensation is simply how we explain the different ways that God chose to manage this world throughout history. Much like the Scofield system, we can see that this coincides with God giving new revelation (house rules) to one or more people. With new revelation comes a new administration or dispensation.

As my children have grown older, the rules in our home have changed. As they grew, I gave them new information (revelation) which sometimes led to added responsibilities or more freedoms. Even though they continued to be under many of the same rules, each new system was at least a little different with the new revelation. Additionally, with four children, the rules were often different based on their age or maturity, meaning that, over the years, we have had many administrations in our home, often operating at the same time.

To summarize: Dispensationalism sees the world as a household managed by God. In his household, God directs everything for his own glory by giving different revelation to different people and groups over time. This revelation results in distinct administrations or dispensations over those people and groups.

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[6] Cone, 308–330.

[7] *oikonomia* (οἰκονομία) comes from the Greek words *oikos* (οἶκος), meaning "house," and *nomos* (νόμος), meaning "law or rule." An oikonomia is essentially a rule in a household.

[8] Ryrie, 33.

Surprisingly, the Scriptures use the word *oikonomia* to name only two dispensations and imply a third. Bible translations often render this with three different words:

1. "I became a minister *[of the church]* according to the **stewardship** from God" (Col 1:25).[9] "Stewardship" is *oikonomia*. The church is one of God's distinct administrations in this world and the one which included the apostle Paul.
2. "in the **dispensation** of the fullness of the times, He might gather together in one all things in Christ" (Eph 1:10). "Dispensation" here is *oikonomia*. "The fullness of the times" is a distinct dispensation which will come at some point after the Church.
3. "to make all see what *is* the **fellowship** of the mystery, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God" (Eph 3:9). "Fellowship" is *oikonomia* (in many Byzantine and Alexandrian manuscripts). This "mystery" called the Church had a distinct beginning which God did not reveal in the Old Testament, meaning that there was at least one dispensation before it.

Five dispensations before the church

The question, then, is, "How many *other* dispensations can we legitimately infer from Scripture based on our definition?" If we can determine when God gave new revelation, we can identify when a new dispensation began. Including the three just mentioned, this chapter suggests a total of nine that fulfill the definition that a dispensation is a distinct way that God administrates this world – five before and three after the Church.[10]

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[9] Except otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations in this chapter are taken from the New King James Version. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission.

[10] It is essential to note that these nine dispensations cover only God's rule over humanity. A more exhaustive study would have to include different dispensations for the angels as well.

Dispensation #1: Free Will (or "Innocence")

We find the first dispensation in Genesis 1–2 at the beginning of humanity. Often called the dispensation of "Innocence," this short-lived administration describes a time when there were few laws over humanity and a seemingly perfect relationship between God and man. Adam and Eve were to populate the planet and were given complete dominion over all of creation (Gen 1:26; 2:15), although they were to eat from only the plants (Gen 1:29; 2:9; 9:3). However, they were not to eat the fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil; that would result in immediate death (Gen 2:16–17).

This dispensation is called "Innocence" because humans had not yet sinned and had no inherent sin nature (Rom 5:12); thus, humans were innocent before God. We may also call this "Free Will" because this was the only time in human history that man had a completely unbiased ability to choose to obey or disobey God. Once Adam sinned, we lost that ability; all people are now born naturally sinful, tending to choose sin and self rather than God. In the Church Age, a believer receives a new nature at salvation (2 Cor 5:17) and the power of sin over him is broken, so that he has a renewed freedom to choose between sinning and submitting to Christ (Rom 6:12–23). However, because of the inherent sin nature that resides even in believers, the dispensation of Innocence or Free Will ended with the Fall.

Dispensation #2: Moral Conscience (or "Conscience")

The next point of new revelation came in Gen 3:14–19, immediately after the Fall. As God had promised, Adam and Eve died spiritually when Adam ate the fruit in direct rebellion to God's command. While there were eventually some physical consequences (e.g., increased pain in childbirth for women, increased labor to provide food, and physical death), the spiritual consequence was much greater and immediate.

Spiritual death caused a separation from God that marked a change in how God had to deal with or govern humanity. Although God promised that a Redeemer would someday come to set things right (Gen 3:15), humanity

entered a new relationship with God based on an infinite number of unspoken and unwritten laws. It is impossible for a human to know every one of God's laws (the hundreds of commands in the Mosaic Law did not include everything), and even the best person is bound to violate God's infinite holiness without knowing it. For this reason, God inscribed his basic moral law onto the human heart in what we call our "conscience," so no one is ever totally without God's law.

> "When Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves, who show **the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness**, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing *them*)." (Rom 2:14–15)

Because God never "formally" gave these laws to humanity, in His graciousness, He in a sense actually "overlooked" many sins while waiting for the appropriate time to send Jesus.

> "Truly, **these times of ignorance God overlooked**, but now commands all men everywhere to repent." (Acts 17:30)
>
> "For until the law sin was in the world, but **sin is not imputed when there is no law**." (Rom 5:13)
>
> "God set forth [Jesus] *as* a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because **in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed**." (Rom 3:25)

Interestingly, nothing in Scripture indicates that this dispensation has ended. At the very least, everything in this dispensation has carried forward into those that followed. When speaking of the Church Age, Paul told Timothy that false teachers would have their consciences "seared" (1 Tim 4:2) and that Timothy should have "faith and a good conscience" (1 Tim 1:19). Paul also

taught that conscience was one of the reasons believers must continue to be subject to human government, which is the next dispensation (Rom 13:5).

Dispensation #3: Human Government

Continuing our trek through Genesis, the next new piece of revelation came in Genesis 9. Following the Flood, God gave Noah three commands in verses 1–6. First, Noah and his family were to repopulate the Earth. Eventually, the entire world rebelled by gathering together to build the Tower of Babel, so God confused their languages to scatter them around the Earth (Gen 11:1–9). Second, humans, who were originally vegetarian, were now able to eat "every moving thing that lives" in addition to "the green herbs." Third, humans were to execute murderers. Unlike before the Flood, God now commanded society to hold human life as sacred and to put to death any animal or person who violated God's image by murdering a human being. We should clarify that God's instruction for capital punishment was not for personal revenge. This was given to society and required a system of investigation, evidence, and fair judgment. With this command, the dispensation of Human Government began.

Much like the moral conscience, God never canceled the role of human government. Even in the current Church Age, believers are commanded to "be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God" (Rom 13:1). Further, government is still considered "God's minister, an avenger to *execute* wrath on him who practices evil" (13:4). Thus, Human Government is a distinguishable dispensation with a fixed starting point, though it will not reach its conclusion until the Eternal State.[11]

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[11] Some people will argue that every dispensation must end before another can begin. This is one legitimate way to view them. However, only a few dispensations are given specific end points in Scripture, so it is also legitimate to conclude that they may overlap each other.

Dispensation #4: The Abrahamic Promises (or "Promise")

The next point at which God gave new revelation about how He would govern is in Genesis 12:2–3, where God made two key promises to Abraham, each one unfolding into a series of additional promises and covenants. God told Abraham:

> "I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

Without getting into the details of the Abrahamic Covenant itself,[12] this passage reveals that God would govern this world differently than before. This administration has two parts. First, Abraham and his descendants would have special status before God and in the world. Later in Genesis 17:19, God clarified that these promises (which He would confirm in the Covenants) would apply only to Abraham's descendants through Isaac and, later, through Jacob (Gen 25:23; 28:4, 13–15) – also known as Israel or the Jewish people.

The second part of this administration has to do with the rest of humanity, the Gentiles. God promised that He would deal with the other "families of the earth" based on how they dealt with Abraham and his family. The meaning of "bless" here is best understood within the meaning of "curse." Although he used the same word for "bless" ("I will **bless** those who **bless** you"), God used two different words to describe the curse. The word that describes what God will do, *'ārar* (אָרַר) is not significant. It is a common word Moses frequently used to indicate inflicting a curse upon someone.[13] So what demands such a

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[12] For further explanation of the Abrahamic Covenant, see my article "The Nature of the Coming Messianic Kingdom as Found in its Covenants" at theologyisforeveryone.com.

[13] Moses had already used the word, *'ārar*, five times before in Genesis 3:14, 17; 4:11; 5:29; and 9:25. In Genesis 12:3 (as well as several other places), *'ārar* is used as an antonym of "to bless" (Heb. *bārak*, בָּרַךְ).

response from God? The word for what the offending nation does *qālal* (קָלַל), "be slight, swift, trifling."[14] God's promise to Abraham was that Abraham's family would be so special to God that anyone who was even condescending toward them would bring God's curse upon themselves. The NET properly brings across this nuance: "The one who treats you lightly I must curse." Thus, God ruled this dispensation based on ethnicity and human interaction. Descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob have promises that are not given to the rest of us. How Gentiles treat the Jews affects how God will treat the Gentiles.

Many passages reveal that this promise to bless and curse remains in force now and into the Tribulation (Matt 25:31–46) and the Millennial Kingdom (Isa 60:10–14). During the dispensation of the Church, it is true that believing Jews and Gentiles are made into a new entity (Eph 2:11–22), making them equal recipients of Christ (Gal 3:28). However, since Gentile treatment of Israel is not a matter of salvation, since there are many in the Church dispensation who will not be saved, and since there is nothing in Scripture that specifically puts this promise on hold, it seems likely that God continues to deal with nations and individuals in direct relation to how those nations and individuals treat Israel and the Jewish people, even during the Church Age. The key parts of this dispensation will not conclude until the Eternal State or "the fullness of the times," meaning that it in some way overlaps with every dispensation yet to come.

Dispensation #5: The Mosaic Law (or "Law")

The dispensation of Law can be distinguished from those that came before it in one key way: it applied only to the ethnic nation of Israel, not all of humanity.

The dispensation of Law started in Exodus 20 when God laid out a specific set of laws that were to govern Israel. Exodus 20:2 clearly states that only Israel was under this law because God described them as those whom He brought

[14] s.v., קָלַל, *Brown-Driver-Briggs*, Bibleworks 9.0.

"out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." Their unique role under this Law is repeatedly emphasized, noting that the Law was to separate them from the other nations (see Lev 18:24; Num 23:9; Deut 26:19; 28:1).

As has been shown, some dispensations seem to overlap those that follow them. This is not the case with the Mosaic Law. Jesus said He came to fulfill the Law or bring it to completion (Matt 5:20). Three decades later, Paul wrote that Jesus did just that; He was "the end of the law" (Rom 10:4), because the Law, with all its decrees, was nailed to the cross (Col 2:14). Thus, the Law had a clear beginning and end and governed only the ethnic nation of Israel from Mount Sinai to the cross (approximately 1445 B.C. to A.D. 33).

Conclusion

In concluding this first set, an examination of the Scriptures reveals five dispensations through which God governed this world before the Church. Of these five, three of them continue to affect people today, overlapping into the Church Age: Moral Conscience, Human Government, and Abrahamic Promises. The other two, Innocence/Free Will and Mosaic Law, had definitive endpoints and did not extend into succeeding dispensations.

Dispensation #6: The Church

The Church began 50 days following Jesus' death and resurrection, on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2.[15] More than anything else, the distinguishing characteristic of the Church is the baptism of the Holy Spirit. This is the act by which every believer in the gospel of Christ is joined immediately and permanently to the new Body of Christ, which was formed in Acts 2. Jesus revealed to Paul that the Church is "one new man" and "one body" (Eph 2:14–16) which

[15] There is some debate among dispensationalists over whether Acts 2 is truly the beginning of the Church Age. However, those who consistently hold to a literal method of interpretation emphasize that Peter called the Acts 2 event "the beginning" (Acts 11:15). A much more interesting discussion has to do with the 50-day transition period after the Law ended on the cross but before the Church began.

was not foreseen by the Hebrew prophets (Eph 3:5–6). This new body is comprised of all who believe, no matter their ethnic or social status (1 Cor 12:13).

Although the Church itself will never cease to exist, the way God is currently governing—allowing all people the freedom to hear the gospel and believe—will come to an end. Both Jesus and Paul prophesied that at an unknown date in the future, Jesus will return to receive the Church to Himself. This will be the first meeting of the entire Church; it will take place in the clouds, not on the ground; and it will include the resurrection of all Church Age believers (John 14:1–3; 1 Thess 4:13–18; 1 Cor 15:51–52).

Three dispensations after the Church

In the Scofield system, there is only one dispensation that follows the Church, namely, the Kingdom. Using Ryrie's definition that a dispensation is simply a distinct form of God's administration, this section proposes that the Kingdom is one of three dispensations to follow the Church, the other two being the Tribulation and the "Fullness of the Times."

Dispensation #7: The Tribulation

The dispensation that immediately follows the Church is usually called the Tribulation. Like the Free Will, Mosaic Law, and Church dispensations, the Tribulation will have fixed beginning and end points and will not overlap or extend into other dispensations. The Tribulation will last only seven years (shorter than all the others except Free Will) when God will rule in a way unlike anything he has done before. The primary purposes of the Tribulation are 1) for God to execute his judgment upon Israel for their unbelief and rebellion in previous dispensations, bringing them fully back to Himself (Jer 30:7), and 2) to pour out His wrath on the unbelieving nations, especially those who abused Israel (Ezek 7; Rev 16). While the Hebrew prophets described the Millennial Kingdom in rich detail, the details of the Tribulation are provided primarily in Daniel (especially regarding Antichrist) and Revelation 6–19.

During this time, God will allow Satan great freedom to rule this world to **almost** the full extent of his power (see Rev. 12–13). Even though Satan will be in power, he will rule only as an agent within God's administration.

The Tribulation will culminate when Satan and Antichrist bring their worldwide army to the gates of Jerusalem to permanently destroy it. At that time Jesus will return to Bozrah (Isa 63), the valley of Megiddo (Rev 16:16), and the Mount of Olives (Zech 14:1–4) in a series of battles to free His people, ending in the complete overthrow of Antichrist and his rule (Rev 19:11–21).

Dispensation #8: The Millennial Kingdom

The Millennial Kingdom is the next distinct period of God's governing over this world. This Kingdom dispensation will begin 75 days following the Second Coming of Jesus (Dan 12:11–13; cf. Rev 13:5–6).[16] It also has a specific length of time, which John said would be 1,000 years, at which point it must end (Rev 20:1–7).

The Hebrew prophets and the Church apostles alike claimed that the Messiah's Kingdom will be characterized by peace and righteousness (Isa 9:7; Rev 20:1–6), when Jesus will sit on the throne of David (Luke 1:31–33), fulfilling the promise of a never-ending Davidic dynasty (2 Sam 7:8–16). During Messiah's Kingdom, God will lift the curse over creation, though people will still sin and rebel, requiring Jesus to rule through both wisdom and force (Isa 11:1–9).

We must admit that, due to the lack of additional revelation, it can be difficult to discern between the Millennial Kingdom and the Eternal State in the Hebrew prophetic books. As with many other things, the Old Testament prophets did not have enough revelation to distinguish between the two phases, but probably saw only one final dispensation. Thus, chapters like

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[16] The 42 months that Antichrist will have free reign is the second three-and-a-half years of the Tribulation, also called "1,260 days" and "a time and times and half a time" in both Revelation and Daniel. In Daniel 12:11–13, Gabriel told Daniel that he would not be resurrected and enter the promised rest until 1,335 days, 75 days after the end of the Tribulation.

Isaiah 65–66, which refer to "new heavens and a new earth," sound much like the environment described in Kingdom passages. Following Paul's command not to go "beyond what is written" (1 Cor 4:6), we must be careful to accept our limited knowledge of future events, while submitting to those that clearly differentiate the Millennial Kingdom and the Eternal State.

Dispensation #9: The Fullness of the Times

Returning to Paul's definition of the final dispensation, Ephesians 1:9–10 states:

> "having made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure which He purposed in Himself, that in the dispensation of the fullness of the times He might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth— in Him."

The key phrase is in verse ten, "the dispensation [*oikonomia*] of the fullness of the times." The phrase "the fullness of the times" is *ta plērōma tōn kairōn* (τὰ πλήρωμα τῶν καιρῶν). Bauer defines *plērōma* (πλήρωμα) as "that which is brought to fullness or completion; the state of being full."[17] In various contexts, *kairos* (καίρος) can mean a fixed period, a season, or even an age. Thus, when exploring God's various methods of governing this world, "the dispensation of the fullness of the times" must refer to the final administration that brings all other ages to completion.

Supporting this understanding is Paul's description that this will be when God will "gather together in one all things in Christ" including everything in Heaven and on Earth. Although the traditional Scofield/Chafer system identifies the Millennial Kingdom as the final dispensation, we must ask whether the Millennium will be when all things are finally completed, including those

[17] s.v., πλήρωμα, Frederick William Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, Third Edition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), Bibleworks 9.0.

things in Heaven and on Earth. An examination of Scripture proves that this is not so.

In 1 Corinthians 15:22–26, Paul identified a distinction between the Millennial Kingdom, when Christ will reign, and "the end":

> "For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. But each one in his own order: Christ, the firstfruits; afterward those *who are* Christ's at His coming. **Then *comes* the end, when He delivers the kingdom to God the Father**, when He puts an end to all rule and all authority and power. For He must reign till He has put all his enemies under His feet. The last enemy *that* will be destroyed *is* death."

"The end" is a period following "the kingdom" after Jesus has reigned long enough to "put all enemies under His feet," including death itself. Revelation 20:7–15 details these events as taking place immediately **after** the Millennial Kingdom, which culminates in the Great White Throne Judgment. Notice verses seven and fourteen: "Now when the thousand years have expired… Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire" along with all unbelievers of all time.

It is finally at this point, not during the Millennial Kingdom, "that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and *that* every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ *is* Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil 2:10–11).

After seeing the future Millennium and Great White Throne, John wrote, "Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea" (Rev 21:1). Then, John "heard a loud voice from heaven, saying, 'Behold, the tabernacle of God *is* with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them *and be* their God. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away" (vv. 3–4). Additionally, God Himself describes this time as when "I make all things new" (v. 5). In this

new time and place where all things will be new, there will be no temple, no sun, no night, nothing unclean, and no curse (Rev 21:22, 23, 27; 22:3, 5), a time when "His servants shall serve him…and they shall reign forever and ever" (22:3, 5).

Looking at the overwhelming evidence in Scripture, we must conclude that the dispensation of the Fullness of the Times should be identified with the Eternal State, not the Millennial Kingdom.

Conclusion

A dispensation is a distinct administration of God over this world. Based on the evidence provided in Scripture of the various ways God has and will actively govern this world, it seems appropriate to conclude that there are at least nine identifiable dispensations, summarized as follows:

1. **Free Will or Innocence**. Originally, humans were without sin and had the complete freedom to choose to obey or disobey God.
2. **Moral Conscience**. Humans have at least a portion of God's law divinely placed in our hearts. Believers and unbelievers alike are accountable before God for violating our consciences.
3. **Human Government**. Human society is responsible for identifying those who do wrong and punishing them, especially those who harm fellow human beings. Even in the Church Age, Christians are subject to human governments.
4. **Abrahamic Promises**. God deals with nations and individuals based on how they treat the Jewish people. Those who bless Israel live under God's blessing; those who do not, bring God's curse upon themselves, but this is not a matter of salvation. Additionally, God is still working to build Abraham into a great nation, some details of which He has not yet fulfilled.
5. **Mosaic Law**. This was a fixed dispensation characterized by a specific law code over the nation of Israel only. Since this law code did not

apply outside of Israel, the rest of the world continued to live under Moral Conscience, Human Government, and the Abrahamic Promises. Jesus fulfilled the Law at the cross, bringing this dispensation to an end.

6. **Church**. The Church is a unique group of people made up of all those who believe in Jesus as Savior, no matter their ethnic or social background. The baptism of the Holy Spirit (placing a new believer immediately and permanently into the Body of Christ) is the defining characteristic of this dispensation, which will end when Jesus removes the Church from Earth to be with him forever.

7. **Tribulation**. The Tribulation will be the time when God pours out his wrath and judgment on unbelieving Israel and the rest of the world and brings Israel back to Himself. He will use Satan, demons, holy angels, humans, and inanimate creation as his agents during this administration. It will conclude with Jesus' return to the Earth at the Second Coming.

8. **Millennial Kingdom**. The Millennium is the Messianic Kingdom promised throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. During this time, when Jesus is ruling as king from Jerusalem, he will finally fulfill many ancient prophecies. It will conclude with a final uprising of Satan and unbelieving humans, followed by the judgment of all unbelievers of all time at Great White Throne.

9. **Fullness of the Times or the Eternal State**. After the final judgment, the current creation will be destroyed and re-created. God will finish fulfilling all His promises from all past ages, completing all things in Christ. All believers and holy angels from all time will enjoy God and His presence forever without end, while all unbelievers and wicked angels from all time will suffer punishment and separation from God in the lake of fire forever without end.

Glossary

You will find these key words and phrases used throughout the book. They are bolded and followed by an asterisk when they are introduced or defined, and that page number is included here so you can quickly find the more detailed description and usage.

Authorial intent (page 37) What the author of the passage meant when he wrote it. This goes along with the "historical" part of the LGH method which explores the details of the original audience and historical context of the passage. "Whatever the author meant originally is what the passage must always mean."

Autographs (page 33) The term used to refer to the original writings of the Scriptures. None of these original writings still exist, but we have thousands of copies, called "manuscripts" (see "Manuscripts").

Biblical theology (page 104) A system of beliefs built strictly from the Bible rather than from other places and systems. It may be categorized by book or writer (e.g., Matthean theology, Pauline theology) rather than by theological topic. It works in conjunction with historical theology and systematic theology. (See "Historical theology" and "Systematic theology")

Conceptual equivalence (page 43) The translation philosophy that emphasizes the concepts presented by the biblical writers rather than translating their exact words or phrasing.

Context (page 37) The words, verses, chapters, and books surrounding a passage. It can also refer to the historical situation in which the writer and audience found themselves.

Cross-reference (page 161) A verse that appears to connect to another verse in some way. This could be by direct quote, allusion, or similar topics. Cross reference lists and books help show how the Bible fits together.

Deductive study (page 49) The "Sherlock Holmes" method. The interpreter begins with the end in mind (the perceived meaning of the passage), then works through the Bible looking for which passages (clues) fit the desired interpretation. The opposite of inductive study. (See "Inductive study")

Descriptive passages (page 73) Sections of the Bible that describe historical or future events as they happened or will happen without necessarily giving instructions to modern readers on how to live. The opposite of prescriptive passages. (See "Prescriptive passages")

Dispensationalism (page 138) The theological system that derives as a natural conclusion of the LGH hermeneutic method. It recognizes that God has managed the world in different ways throughout time and that there is a clear and complete distinction between Israel as God's special nation and the church as the Body of Christ.

Dynamic equivalence (page 42) The translation philosophy that emphasizes the meaning of the words written by the biblical writers. It often translates entire phrases in their content rather than the exact words in order to make the text easier to read.

Eisegesis (page 55) From a Greek word meaning "to put into," eisegesis is the practice of reading one's own theology and presuppositions into the biblical text. The opposite of exegesis (See "Exegesis")

Exegesis (page 52) From a Greek word meaning "to bring out," exegesis is the practice of drawing out the theology and truth found in the biblical text. The opposite of eisegesis. (See "Eisegesis")

Formal equivalence (page 39) The translation philosophy that emphasizes the exact words written by the biblical writers even if it makes the translation more "wooden" or stilted.

Grammatical (page 59) The part of the LGH method that reminds us that every language has rules that must be followed. It allows for the use of figurative language (metaphors, similes, hyperbole, parables, etc.) based on the normal meaning of the words used in those constructions where the original language allows it.

Hermeneutics (page 54) The combination of rules and skill brought together to examine a historical document to interpret its meaning. There are many different hermeneutic methods.

Historical (page 60) The part of the LGH method that reminds us that every passage was written to a specific historical audience at a specific time in history for a specific reason or situation known to the writer and the audience. Our interpretation must consider all those things if we are going to arrive at the proper meaning of the text.

Historical theology (page 104) The study of how theology developed over time. It works in conjunction with biblical theology and systematic theology. (See "Biblical theology" and "Systematic theology")

Hypothesis (page 85) A tentative conclusion based on evidence that has not yet been tested or proven. It may be confirmed as either true or false once tested. Another good word for hypothesis is "theory."

Inductive study (page 49) The "Wilderness Explorer" method. The interpreter begins his or her journey not knowing what they will find (the meaning of the passage). Each Bible passage is considered a clue leading to the only

legitimate interpretation. This is the LGH method and the opposite of deductive study. (See "Deductive study")

Inspiration (page 21) The process by which God managed the writing of the words of Scripture while maintaining the human writers' personalities, experiences, etc. Inspiration makes the Bible completely inerrant and gives it the same authority as any of God's spoken words.

Koine Greek (page 13) The period of history of the Greek language from approximately 300 BC to AD 300, when Greek spread quickly across the known world and became accessible to the common people. "Koine" is the Greek word for "common" or "shared."

Literal-grammatical-historical or LGH (page 58) The phrase used to describe the interpretation method that, when used consistently, causes the interpreter to let the details of the passage speak for itself. (See "Literal," "Grammatical," and "Historical" for details on each part.)

Literal (page 58) The part of the LGH method that reminds us to interpret the Bible using the plain, normal, natural meaning of the words in their context.

Manuscripts (page 33) The term used to refer to a copy of the Scriptures (or part of the Scriptures) made from the original autographs (writings). There are more than 5,000 manuscripts of parts of the New Testament in Koine Greek, not including ancient translations from Koine Greek into other languages or any ancient copies of the Old Testament (see "Autographs").

Objectivity (page 71) The ability to see the truth of a situation without bias or prejudice. In hermeneutics, complete objectivity requires acknowledging our presuppositions and not allowing them to unduly influence our interpretation.

Optimal equivalence (page 44) The translation philosophy that attempts to reach the optimum balance of emphasizing the meaning of the exact words written by the biblical writers without sacrificing readability in the receptor language. (See "Receptor language")

Parallelism (page 15) The defining characteristic of Hebrew poetry in which two lines work together, either by repeating, supporting, supplementing, or contrasting each other.

Prescriptive passages (page 73) Sections of the Bible that intentionally provide commands, instructions, or encouragements about how to live rather than simply describing events. The opposite of descriptive passages. (See "Descriptive passages")

Preservation (page 33) The term used to describe the processes by which God has kept the Scriptures throughout time in manuscripts even though the original autographs no longer exist. (See "Autographs" and "Manuscripts")

Presuppositions (page 50) Beliefs that we bring to our study and assume to be true before they are confirmed or contradicted by our study. Objectivity requires that we do not let our presuppositions unnecessarily inform or drive our study. (See "Objectivity")

Principle of single meaning (page 60) The principle that every passage has only one meaning that never changes. Whatever God and the human writer meant when the words were written is the meaning that it always maintains. While a passage can be applied differently, it can never mean anything else. The interpretation process intends to discover the single meaning of the passage.

Receptor language (page 33) The language a work is being translated into from its original language.

Scientific method (page 67) The process of observing, interpreting, and testing data to arrive at an accurate and truthful conclusion of whatever is being studied.

Semantic range (page 79) The range of legitimate meanings for a word. An author chooses words based on the meaning he or she wants to convey.

Systematic theology (page 104) The categorization of a set of beliefs or doctrines like sections or shelves on a bookcase. It can refer to the system of beliefs themselves or the publication of those beliefs. It works in conjunction with biblical theology and historical theology. (See "Biblical theology" and "Historical theology")

Transliteration (page 40) The process of converting a word from one language into another by substituting the letters of the word between the two languages rather than translating the meaning of the word. For example, *logos* is a transliteration of the Greek word, λόγος.

Select Bibliography

As noted throughout this book, many good books and resources have been created over the centuries attempting to help us study our Bibles. Some are directed toward Bible college and seminary students; others are not. Some are better as references; others are meant to be read straight through.

This selection includes several different types of resources based on the discussions found throughout this book. Some teach different approaches or perspectives to Bible study. Others give overviews or introductions to the Bible itself or speak on specific aspects of the history and culture of the ancient world. There is also a list of recommended books on theological topics. All can be helpful when used for their respective purposes.

One final note is that some of these are older works. This means that they may be easier to find in the public domain either free or much less expensive than newer resources. Some of them have been updated with different editors than those listed here.

(Mandatory disclaimer: Including a title in this list does not mean I endorse everything in that book or the doctrine or perspective of the authors. It means that it may be a useful resource on that topic.)

Bible introductions and surveys

A General Introduction to the Bible, Norman Geisler and William Nix

An Introduction to the Old Testament, Gleason Archer

Survey of the Old Testament, Paul Benware

Survey of the New Testament, Paul Benware

The Promises of God: A Bible Survey, Christopher Cone

Background and cultural resources

The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah, Alfred Edersheim

Sketches of Jewish Social Life, Alfred Edersheim

The Bible Knowledge Background Commentary, Craig A. Evans

Hailey's Bible Handbook, Henry H. Hailey

International Standard Bible Encyclopedia

Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ, Harold Hoehner

Hermeneutics

Basic Bible Interpretation, Roy B. Zuck

Living by the Book, Howard Hendricks

How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth, Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart

Understanding the Bible: A Guide to Reading and Enjoying Scripture, Robert L. Plummer

Commentaries

Technical

Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary, Harold W. Hoehner

Constable's Notes, Thomas Constable

The Expositor's Greek Testament, W. Robertson Nicoll (editor)

Word Pictures in the New Testament, A. T. Robertson

Word Studies in the New Testament, Marvin R. Vincent

Expository

Bible Exposition Commentary, Warren W. Wiersbe

Bible Knowledge Commentary, John Walvoord and Roy Zuck (editors)

Expositor's Bible Commentary, Frank E. Gaebelein (editor)

Dispensationalism

Dispensationalism, Revised and Expanded, Charles C. Ryrie

What is Dispensationalism?, Paul Miles (editor)

Dispensationalism: Tomorrow and Beyond, Christopher Cone (editor)

Theology

This is a sample list covering certain major doctrines. A more comprehensive list is available on the resources page at theologyisforeveryone.com.

Basic Theology, Charles C. Ryrie

Handbook of Evangelical Theology, Robert Lightner

From the Mind of God to the Mind of Man: A Layman's Guide to How We Got Our Bible, James B. Williams and Randolph Shaylor

Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ, Harold W. Hoehner

Dispensationalism and Free Grace: Intimately Linked, Grant Hawley

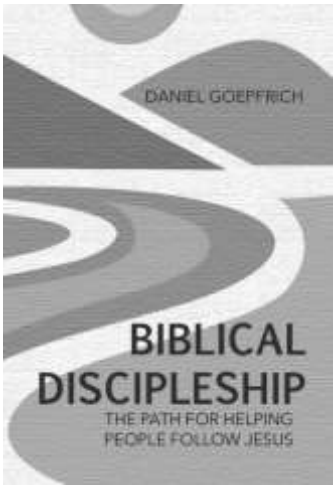
Israelology: The Missing Link in Systematic Theology, Arnold Fruchtenbaum

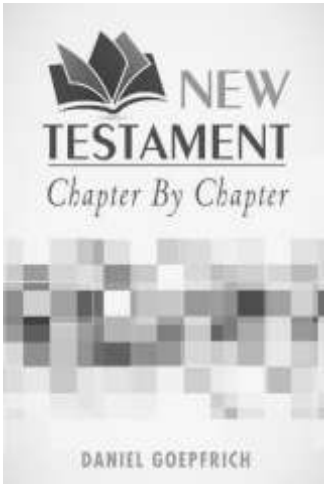
Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership, Alexander Strauch

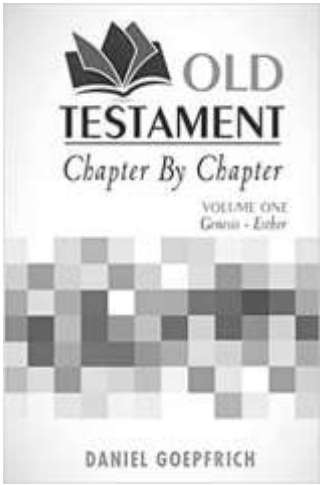
Understanding End Times Prophecy: A Comprehensive Approach, Paul N. Benware

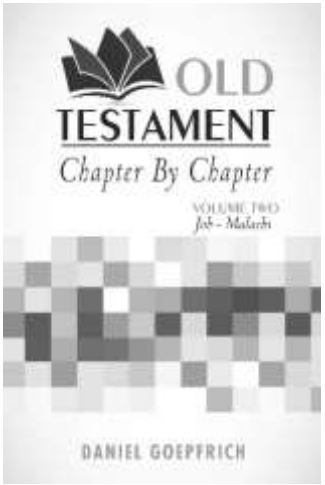
Other books by Dr. Daniel Goepfrich

TheologyIsForEveryone.com









"The modern Christian library contains a good many books on how to study the Bible, most of which fall toward the more academic end of the spectrum, designed for those in professional ministry and theological education. Dr. Goepfrich aims instead for everyone. Offering a simple-to-use method, sensible motivations for its employment, and a friendly tone of writing, I believe he succeeds on all counts."

Mark Perkins, Tahiti, French Polynesia
President, Evanelia Tahiti

"We have been adding Dr. Goepfrich's other books to our curriculum and recommended study items to help people move from sitting in the pews to becoming disciples. This book is remarkably well-written and easy to understand for non-theologians."

Ric Joyner, Florida, USA
CEO, Biblestudycompany.com

"This book came about at the right time. I appreciated how Hermeneutics spans through all questions I've heard about Bible studying and interpretation."

Ssebunya Caleb, Uganda, East Africa

"Dr. Goepfrich has written a fantastic book on Bible study and Hermeneutics! The reader will be well-equipped to study God's word according to a literal grammatical historical hermeneutic using the inductive method of Bible study. I believe this book will be a beneficial resource not only in the classroom, but also to every believer in the church."

Ian Bacon, Missouri, USA
Program Director of Bible & Theology, Calvary University

Daniel Goepfrich (Th.M., D.Min.), an international conference speaker and author, is the Teaching Pastor at Oak Tree Community Church (South Bend, IN). He teaches Greek for Calvary University (Kansas City, MO) and Bible exposition and theology for Word of Life International Bible Institutes. He is Associate Professor of Greek and Hebrew for Colorado Biblical University (Fort Morgan, CO) and served for 15 years as Professor of Bible and Theology at Tyndale Theological Seminary (Hurst, TX).

In 2017, he founded Theology is for Everyone (theologyisforeveryone.com) to produce biblically sound resources that everyone can use and understand. He is the author of several books, journal articles, and multiauthor contributions. Daniel and Saralynn have been married since 1997.

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