

Keys to Understanding the Bible
Unlocking the Meaning of Scripture for Yourself

A self-paced tutorial designed to help you read, study and comprehend the Bible for yourself.

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Cut and Paste Bible Study

It seems that most Christians today have adopted a *cut and paste* approach to the Bible. In fact, it's not unusual to hear someone (even a pastor or Bible teacher) quote a verse or phrase out of context in order to support a point, or to use as a kind of catchphrase or anecdote. This practice is so commonplace that typically we don't even recognize when we are doing it (or realize how irresponsible it is to use God's Word in this way).

On the other hand, many Christians dutifully read through (or *try* to read through) the entire Bible each year, but end up comprehending and retaining very little. At the other end of the spectrum are those who use the *verse-of-the-day* method, which of course is not bad in itself, but usually results in only a piecemeal understanding of Scripture at best.

In this tutorial we will learn about a much more efficient and effective way to read and understand the Bible for yourself.

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Commonsense Principles for Bible Study

Over the the years, theologians and Bible scholars have recognized several basic commonsense principles for interpreting the Scriptures. In the next several minutes, we will look at 7 easy-to-use keys that are based on these principles.

It's our objective that these keys will revolutionize your approach to Bible study, so that you can unlock the meaning of Scripture for yourself and experience firsthand the eternal truth and life-changing power of God's Word.

Key #1

Although there may be more than one interpretation (or opinion) about the meaning of a given passage, there is really **only one correct meaning**.

It's not what I think it means, or what you think it means, that determines the meaning of Scripture. It's the actual meaning (the original intended meaning) that matters.

A particular statement may have numerous possible personal applications, but it can only have one correct meaning. Alternate interpretations which are contradictory can not both be true unless God speaks with a forked tongue.

- R.C. Sproul (Knowing Scripture)

To take a text and place our own meaning on it is a kind of plagiarism.
- Robert H. Stein (*A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible*)

Our goal should always be to get to the actual meaning of the text without reading our own ideas into it. Whenever we put our 'spin' on it, we are in essence changing God's Word to Our Word. Although commonplace, this is one of the most serious errors in Bible study.

"They read from the Book of the Law of God and clearly explained the meaning of what was being read, helping the people understand each passage."

Nehemiah 8:8 (ESV)

Key #2

The correct meaning is always **the author's intended meaning.**

The primary question is not "What does the text mean to me?"
But rather "What did the original author mean to convey?"

The intention of the author is the one sure standard against which we can measure competing interpretations to ascertain the actual meaning of a passage.

- Perry B. Yoder (Toward Understanding the Bible)

To interpret a passage correctly, we must ask and answer two questions: What is the author saying? and; What does the author mean by what he is saying?
- Hadden Robinson (*Discover the Word*)

In the Bible, God used human authors to communicate exactly what He wanted to communicate. The words these men wrote are His words, conveying His meaning.

"Knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit."

2 Peter 1:20-21 (ESV)

Key #3

The author's intended meaning is determined by reading the words and phrases in **their normal literary sense** (on the basis of their common and ordinary usage).

The Bible is not cryptic. It is not mystical or mythical. The Bible is written in human language that is meant to be understood.

The Bible does not take on some special magic that changes basic literary patterns of interpretation. In the Bible a verb is still a verb and a noun is still a noun...

- R.C. Sproul (Knowing Scripture)

The true meaning of Scripture is the natural and obvious meaning..
- John Calvin

The authors of the Bible used common words and phrases to express divine truth to common people. In doing so, they followed the accepted principles of grammar, syntax and speech.

(Note: Like all good writers, the authors of Scripture sometimes use symbols, metaphors and hyperbole. But when these figures of speech are used, it is always to communicate a specific meaning.)

**"The unfolding of your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple."
Psalm 119:130 (NIV)**

Key #4

The meaning of the author's words and sentences must always be understood **in light of their context.**

The meaning of each word and phrase must be considered together with the meaning of the surrounding words and phrases, as well as with the overall content of the book.

A word does not have a meaning without a context, it only has possibilities of meaning.

- J.P. Louw (Semantics of New Testament Greek)

The meaning of words are primarily determined by the usage in a particular context...meanings are to be derived from context.

- Joseph Dillow (The Reign of the Servant Kings)

Failure to consider the context when reading or quoting Scripture, leads to much misinterpretation, misapplication and confusion. It is the context that determines and clarifies the meaning.

"Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction."

2 Peter 3:15-16 (NIV)

Example of the Importance of Context:

Let's say that, out of the blue, you receive a partial text message from a friend that reads, "I'm leaving my wife..."

What does your friend's statement mean? The answer is in the completed text (the context) as shown below.

"I'm leaving my wife for another woman."

"I'm leaving my wife \$200,000 in my will."

"I'm leaving my wife at the mall while I run a few errands."

"I'm leaving my wife with the grandkids for the weekend."

"I'm leaving my wife in the care of the nurse for the day."

"I'm leaving my wife to wash the dinner dishes herself."

"I'm leaving my wife on the trail while I run for help."

Key #5

Each author in the Bible was writing to a specific **audience** (the original readers) about specific **subjects** for a specific **purpose**.

As you read a given passage, ask yourself...

1. Who is the author writing to (who were the original readers)?
2. What is the author writing about (what are the subjects being addressed)?
3. Why is the author writing (what is his purpose for writing)?

A consideration in any interpretation must be...the immediate historical setting and influence [of] the author's world.

- J. Dwight Pentecost (Things to Come)

The situation within which something is said or written is often the single most important factor in understanding...we must see Scripture in its own authentic historical context [setting].

- Perry B. Yoder (Toward Understanding the Bible)

The books of the Bible were written to real people, living in real places, facing real issues. For this reason, we should ask ourselves how the original readers would have understood the author's words. By putting ourselves in 'their shoes' (as best we can), we will likely get a better grasp of the author's meaning.

"After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea...

I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand..."

Colossians 4:16-18 (NIV)

Key #6

The New Testament Letters **explain the meaning** of the Old Testament, the 4 Gospels, and the book of Acts.

As a general rule...

The Old Testament books foretell the events of Christ's coming through ceremonies, sacrifices, types and prophecies.

The 4 Gospels and Acts record (tell the story of) these events through eye-witness accounts and first-hand historical biography.

The N.T. Letters interpret the meaning and significance of these events through the teaching of Christ's Apostles.

The N.T. Letters:

Romans
1 & 2 Corinthians
Galatians
Ephesians
Philippians
Colossians
1 & 2 Thessalonians
1 & 2 Timothy
Titus
Philemon
Hebrews
James
1 & 2 Peter
1, 2 & 3 John
Jude

The New Testament Letters (Epistles) are instructional in nature. Because of this they explain, or help explain, the meaning of all other Scripture. This is especially true of the letters written by Paul.

"All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness."

2 Timothy 3:16 (NKJV)

Key #7

Paul's letter to the **Romans** was specifically written to present and explain the greatest truths of the Bible and the Christian faith.

Romans is a straightforward, systematic and comprehensive treatise of Biblical Christianity. For this reason, it is the starting point for understanding Scripture correctly.

The epistle to the Romans is a cornerstone in the Scriptures...it is the most comprehensive book in in the New Testament. If you are going to study the New Testament, you must diligently study this book.

- Chuck Missler (Learn the Bible in 24 Hours)

*[Romans] is truly the most important piece in the New Testament...
It is well worth a Christian's while...to occupy himself with it daily...
It is impossible to read or to meditate on this letter too much...
It itself is almost bright enough to illumine the entire Scripture.
- Martin Luther (Preface to St. Paul's Letter to the Romans)*

Begin by reading and studying Romans. It will serve as the foundation for all of your future Bible study. Most people (even many Christians), have only a surface understanding of this all-important and life-changing letter.

"And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers."

1 Thessalonians 2:13 (ESV)

Note: The next two pages include a printable overview of all 7 keys and a printable "Major Eras of the Bible" reference chart (you may want to print these pages to keep with your Bible.)

7 Keys to Understanding the Bible

(Unlocking the Meaning of the Bible)

Key #1: Although there may be more than one interpretation (or opinion) about the meaning of a given passage, there is really only one correct meaning. *It's not what I think it means, or what you think it means, that determines the meaning of Scripture (see Key #2).*

Key #2: The correct meaning is always the author's intended meaning. *The primary question is not "What does the text mean to me?" But rather "What did the original author mean to convey?"*

Key #3: The author's intended meaning is determined by reading the words and phrases in their normal literary sense (on the basis of their common and ordinary usage). *The Bible is not cryptic. It is not mystical or mythical. The Bible is written in human language that is meant to be understood.*

Key #4: The meaning of the author's words and sentences must always be understood in light of their context. *The meaning of each word and phrase must be considered together with the meaning of the surrounding words and phrases, as well as with the overall content of the book.*

Key #5: Each author in the Bible was writing to a specific audience (the original readers) about specific subjects for a specific purpose. *Ask yourself... Who is the author writing to? What is the author writing about? Why is the author writing?*

Key #6: The New Testament Letters explain the meaning of the Old Testament, the 4 Gospels, and the book of Acts. *The Old Testament books foretell the events of Christ's coming. The 4 Gospels and Acts record (tell the story of) these events. The N.T. Letters interpret the meaning and significance of these events.*

Key #7: Paul's letter to the Romans was specifically written to present and explain the greatest truths of the Bible and the Christian faith. *Romans is a straightforward, systematic and comprehensive treatise of Biblical Christianity. For this reason, it is the starting point for understanding Scripture correctly.*

"Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth." 2 Timothy 2:15 (NKJV)

Major Eras of the Bible

		Law Era The Law of Moses to the Cross (Old Covenant Period) - Approx 2500 Yrs -						
<p>Pre-Law Era Adam to the Law - Approx 1500 Yrs -</p> <p>Historical: Genesis Exodus (1-19)</p> <p><i>This period of time took place before the Law of Moses was given to Israel.</i></p> <p><i>Although man had a God-given conscience, there was no written law.</i></p> <p><i>Abraham, Isaac & Jacob lived during this period and Israel became a nation.</i></p>	<p>Legal: Exodus (20-50) Leviticus Numbers Deuteronomy</p> <p><i>This period began when God gave the Law of Moses (the Old Covenant) to Israel in Exodus chapter 20.</i></p> <p><i>The Levitical priesthood and the sacrifices were a part of this period.</i></p> <p><i>Although primarily legal in nature, these books also include large historical sections regarding the nation of Israel.</i></p>	<p>Historical: Joshua Joshua Judges Ruth 1&2 Samuel 1&2 Kings 1&2 Chronicles Ezra Nehemiah Esther</p> <p><i>These books are about God's dealings with the nation of Israel.</i></p> <p><i>During this time, Israel was lead by Joshua, the Judges, Samuel, Saul, David, Solomon and the kings of the divided kingdom (Israel to the North, Judah to the South).</i></p>	<p>Wisdom: Job Psalms Proverbs Song of Solomon Ecclesiastes</p> <p><i>A large section of Job is human philosophy.</i></p> <p><i>The Psalms are made up of prayer, worship & song.</i></p> <p><i>Proverbs are short sayings of practical insight and wisdom.</i></p> <p><i>Song of Solomon is a romantic love song.</i></p> <p><i>Ecclesiastes documents Solomon's vain pursuits to find fulfillment in this world.</i></p>	<p>Prophecy: Isaiah Jeremiah Lamentations Ezekiel Daniel Hosea Joel Amos Obadiah Jonah Micah Nahum Habakkuk Zephaniah Haggai Zechariah Malachi</p> <p><i>The Prophetic books speak about Christ's first advent, as well as his second advent (the Future Era).</i></p>	<p>Transitional: Matthew Mark Luke John</p> <p><i>Although the 4 Gospels are found in the New Testament section of our Bibles, it is important to realize that most of what is recorded in these books takes place during the Old Covenant Law Era.</i></p> <p><i>For example, both John the Baptist and Jesus lived their lives under the Old Covenant (the Law of Moses).</i></p> <p><i>On the cross Jesus fulfilled the Law and initiated "the New Covenant in my blood."</i></p>	<p>Current Era The Cross to Christ's Return - 2000 Yrs So Far -</p> <p>Historical: Acts</p> <p><i>The New Covenant was initiated with Christ's death on the cross. Its ultimate fulfillment will take place during the Future Era.</i></p> <p><i>The Church began with the coming of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2).</i></p> <p><i>We are currently living in this era.</i></p>	<p>Letters: Romans 1&2 Corinthians Galatians Ephesians Philippians Colossians 1&2 Thessalonians 1&2 Timothy Titus Philemon Hebrews James 1,2&3 John Jude</p> <p><i>These Letters were written to Christians to explain the great truths of the Bible and the Christian faith. This is especially true of the Book of Romans.</i></p>	<p>Future Era Christ's Return - Yet Future -</p> <p>Prophecy: Revelation</p> <p><i>The first 3 chapters of Revelation include letters to Christian churches, but the rest of the chapters are devoted to prophecy.</i></p> <p><i>This period is also the subject of large portions of Old Testament prophecy. The prophets predicted various aspects of Christ's first coming (already fulfilled), as well as various aspects of His second coming (yet to be fulfilled).</i></p> <p><i>This era begins when Christ returns. He will "reign forever and ever".</i></p>
<p>Adam & Eve (The Fall) Noah (The Flood) Abraham, Isaac, Jacob The 12 Tribes Birth of Moses Plagues, Passover, Red Sea</p>	<p>Moses on Mt. Sinai 10 Commandments Golden Calf Levitical Priesthood Sacrifices & Ceremonies Death of Moses Joshua Leads Israel Promise Land Judges Rule Israel Samuel King Saul David & Solomon Kingdom Divided Israel & Judah Elijah Pre-Exile Prophets Babylonian Captivity Daniel</p>	<p>Exile Prophets Ezra (Temple Rebuilt) Esther Rescues Jews Nehemiah (Walls Rebuilt) Post-Exile Prophets Silent Years Birth of Christ John the Baptist Jesus' Public Ministry Kingdom Preached to Israel John Beheaded Jesus Arrested</p>	<p>Resurrection of Christ Ascension of Christ Day of Pentecost Beginning of the Church Growth of the Church James Put to Death Persecution of the Church Stephen Martyred Conversion of Saul / Paul Missionary Journeys Letters to the Churches (Present Day) (Future Events)</p>					

Note: The Scripture includes additional time divisions and covenants that are not included in this chart. This chart is intended as a starting point for understanding the Major Eras of the Bible.

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