

Study to Show Yourselves Approved



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We Can Understand the Bible...Alike!

Paul, as he wrote to Timothy, encouraged him in studying the word of God. In one of his most well known passages of scripture, Paul wrote:

Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15, KJV).

Paul's instructions to Timothy emphasize the need to spend time with God's word. Some of the more modern translations, such as the New King James, translate Paul's instructions in this way:

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).

This helps us to understand the process by which God expects us to become "approved" before Him. Understanding His word is not something that happens by mere good fortune. It takes diligent work! It takes *study*!

There has been, historically, a false premise set forth declaring that the Bible cannot really be understood. In times past, some religious leaders have acted as if the word of God is really only understandable to the elite, their clergy. While that idea has been combated over time, newer doctrines have developed that have challenged many people's belief that they can read and understand the word of God for themselves. Many religious bodies teach that people can only understand God's word if they somehow miraculously open their hearts and minds to that word. This does two things. First, it makes the revealed word practically useless. After all, if it takes a miraculous revelation to open the words of God for the common man, then why have it at all? Why not just have the miraculous operation? Second, it makes many people ignore God's revelation. If you have been convinced that you cannot understand God's word until there is some miraculous operation, and you have not "felt" that miraculous operation, then there is no reason to even try to understand God's word. Both of these problems are exposed when we actually look at God's word and the instructions that it provides. While we will explore these ideas later in our study, it is prudent to point out at this juncture that the word of God actually addresses the manner in which faith is attained, and it is not through a direct, miraculous operation by God on the heart of the believer:

How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent? As it is written: "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, Who bring glad tidings of good things!" But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, "LORD, who has believed our report?" So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God (Romans 10:14–17).

The process that God has set in place for gaining faith is through listening to His word. Sometimes that may mean that others will help to explain the word, but it is not beyond the understanding of any person of sound mind. As we begin this study that is focused on how we study the Bible, it is important for us to know that we can come to an understanding! We will be looking at the expectations that God has for us, based upon what He has given to us. God has communicated His mind with us through His inspired writers. We can understand it, and we can all understand it alike!

Communication...

One of the first things that we have to recognize if we are to understand the Bible is that the written word is indeed God's communication with mankind. When we read the Bible, we should realize that the same basic principles of communication apply to it as we find in every other aspect of our lives. We understand what is written in scripture just as we understand what is written in any other type of book. When we sit down to study, for example, a history book, we know that the author wrote the information in such a manner as to convey what was in his mind to our minds. God's written word is intended to accomplish the same thing. Communication is the process by which the ideas in one person's mind are conveyed to be understood in the mind of another.

The apostle Paul addressed this very idea in Ephesians 3:1-13. There, he wrote about the process of revelation. He said that by revelation, the mystery of Christ was made known to him. How was that revelation presented? Paul said that the Holy Spirit revealed it through the apostles and prophets. In 1 Corinthians 2:9-16, Paul also addressed this idea. There, Paul declared that it is the Holy Spirit who searches out the things of the mind of God, and reveals it to His apostles and prophets. This is the message of the gospel revealed for us! God has provided the things that we need, and He expects that we are going to be obedient to His word:

"The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law (Deuteronomy 29:29).

God has revealed what we have been given for a reason. Has He revealed everything about Himself, His domain, or the spiritual realm? Of course not. We could not comprehend much of that even if God did reveal it. He has revealed what we need to know. He has given us all things that pertain to "life and godliness" (2 Peter 1:1-4). He has provided enough information for us to live in this life the way He expects us to live so that we can have eternal life in the hereafter.

Returning to Ephesians 3, we can see that God intended for this revelation to be understood. Paul, speaking of the communication process, said that the Holy Spirit revealed the mystery to him, and that when the Ephesians read what he wrote, they would "understand [his] knowledge in the mystery of Christ..." (Ephesians 3:4). Later, Paul said that this revelation was given "to the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church..." (Ephesians 3:10). Through the revelation, we can have the knowledge of Christ, and wisdom of God!

Does this mean that everything revealed is easy to understand? No, it does not. In fact, we are told that there are things in the scripture that are very difficult to understand. Peter wrote the following concerning the teachings of Paul:

Therefore, beloved, looking forward to these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless; and consider that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation—as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures (2 Peter 3:14–16).

This is why the inspired writer of Hebrews could make a distinction between *milk* and *solid food* as it relates to the oracles of God (Hebrews 5:12-14). There are some things from the word of God that are easier, yet necessary for the one who is a babe in Christ. Then, there are things that are far more difficult to grasp, and are therefore suitable for those who have grown in such a way as to be able to understand them. Peter used similar terminology to describe this growth and understanding process (1 Peter 2:1-3).

For successful communication to occur, the one who is receiving the message must understand it as it is in the mind of the one giving the message. If I am describing how I want a particular job completed, I have not been successful in communicating with an employee until he understands what I want. As an employer, I will not be pleased with the work of my staff if they fail to accomplish the work I assign them in the way I want it done! I must communicate my desires to them in a manner that they can understand. God has, as Paul wrote, revealed His mind for us, so that we can understand the mystery of Christ! He has sent His message so that we can understand what He expects of us. He has *communicated* with us! Having done so, He expects that we will work to understand that communication as He has delivered it. Until we understand God's word in our minds as He delivered it from His, we have much work to do. Of course, this will be a life long endeavor. Paul himself made it clear that he had to continually work toward the prize so that he did not fall short:

Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it. And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown. Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified (1 Corinthians 9:24–27).

All of this leads us to the conclusion that God has made it possible for us to understand His word. If there is a failure to understand, it is not on the part of God, or His revealed word. The fault can only lie with us. We have done something that obscures our understanding of the word that has been delivered. We may be so hardened by sin that we just simply refuse to listen to what God has said on a matter (2 Thessalonians 1:1-12). Such a problem can only be fixed by correcting our heart, or attitude. We have to want to understand the will of the Lord, or else we will never come to understanding. Another possible reason for a lack of understanding is that something is amiss in our process of gaining the needed information. Perhaps we have not grown enough to gather enough information to come to a full understanding of a particular topic. Perhaps we have not learned how to take the written word and process it in such a way as to draw out the conclusions that God expects of us. Our study, moving forward, will focus on this last idea. If we have the right attitudes concerning the word of God, then learning how to study it will open our understanding into the very mind of God (at least to the extent He has revealed His mind)!

Can We Really Understand the Word of God Alike?

With the plethora of denominations that identify as “Christian,” it seems that understanding the word of God alike is a fantasy dream. There are many who see no reason to even try to understand things alike. They believe that there is no absolute truth, and studying the Bible is more about feeling good about one's self than it is about pleasing God. They believe that everyone will make it to heaven, regardless of what they believe about the Bible, so there is no incentive to study with others to either evaluate their own beliefs, or to convince others.

When we look at what God has to say through His revealed word, we quickly find that accepting differing beliefs concerning that word is not supported. To the contrary, God calls for unity of faith and practice among those who are His people. To accept something less is not from God, but rather accepting the practices of the world. Consider Paul's call for unity:

Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment. (1 Corinthians 1:10)

Paul would continue in that chapter to rebuke the Corinthians for their denominational mindset.

They had begun to divide up, calling themselves by the names of the men they followed:

Now I say this, that each of you says, "I am of Paul," or "I am of Apollos," or "I am of Cephas," or "I am of Christ." Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? (1 Corinthians 1:12–13)

We read of this division in the first century, and see the reprimand that accompanies it, and yet there are many who believe the divisions today to be acceptable to God! One of the underlying themes of the epistle to the Philippian brethren is the need to maintain unity:

Only let your conduct be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of your affairs, that you stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel... (Philippians 1:27)

Therefore if there is any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind (Philippians 2:1–2).

If God did not approve of that division in the first century, He surely does not approve of it today either! This tells us that everyone can understand the word of God alike. There is only one right way of understanding something that God has delivered to us. If we do not agree on what God has said, then the fault lies with us. We must continue to “be diligent” to understand what God has revealed. We cannot merely accept contrary positions as if both can be correct! Remember, we must come to understand each doctrine and teaching as it originated in the mind of God. We cannot conform it to what we desire!

For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His majesty. For He received from God the Father honor and glory when such a voice came to Him from the Excellent Glory: “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.” And we heard this voice which came from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain. And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts; knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:16–21).

Moving Forward...

As we move forward with our study, we will be working toward understanding how we can understand the scriptures in the way that God has revealed them. We will be trying examining how to truly understand what was in the mind of God, by understanding what He revealed to us. Only by getting to the point that we understand scripture as God wants us to understand it can we possibly have any hope of coming to unity of both faith and practice. God wants for us to have no divisions among us. We can only achieve that by studying His word diligently, and then conforming ourselves to the truths contained therein.

There will be many challenges set forth throughout this study. These challenges should help us to be strengthened in our faith, strengthened in our ability to defend those things that we believe. The process that we work through will, Lord willing, provide a strong foundation for examining every scripture and doctrine that we can encounter, and determine just what God’s will for us is. That does not mean that we will be perfect in our understanding all the time. But, by being diligent, and being willing to constantly evaluate our beliefs and practices by the standard of the scriptures, we will ever be improving ourselves and our service before the Lord!

Questions...

1. What did Paul mean when he encouraged Timothy to “Study to shew thyself approved unto God...”?
2. How is faith developed? How might one be helped by another person in the process of developing this faith?
3. What is needed for effective communication to take place?
4. Describe the revelation process as revealed by Paul in Ephesians chapter 3.
5. What is the difference between *milk* and *solid food* as it applies to Bible study?
6. What might keep us from understanding the will of God as He would have us to?
7. Is it possible for us to understand God’s word? Is it possible for every honest person to come to the same understanding of the word of God?
8. Is God pleased with religious division? How can division be avoided?

How We Approach the Bible

The manner in which we approach the Bible will have a significant impact on our understanding of it. The two basic ways of looking at scripture can be summed up in Jesus' question to the chief priests and elders who were seeking to entrap Him:

Now when He came into the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people confronted Him as He was teaching, and said, "By what authority are You doing these things? And who gave You this authority?" But Jesus answered and said to them, "I also will ask you one thing, which if you tell Me, I likewise will tell you by what authority I do these things: The baptism of John—where was it from? From heaven or from men?" And they reasoned among themselves, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' He will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'From men,' we fear the multitude, for all count John as a prophet." So they answered Jesus and said, "We do not know." And He said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things (Matthew 21:23–27).

The only two possible sources for the authority by which Jesus spoke were heaven (that is God) or men. We can ask the very same question concerning all of scripture, as it is the end result of the authority that was exercised by Jesus (Hebrews 1:1-4).

There are many people who believe that the scriptures are nothing more than the invention of men. In an article entitled *21 Books You Don't Have to Read*, GQ Magazine printed this concerning the Bible:

The Holy Bible is rated very highly by all the people who supposedly live by it but who in actuality have not read it. Those who have read it know there are some good parts, but overall it is certainly not the finest thing that man has ever produced. It is repetitive, self-contradictory, sententious, foolish, and even at times ill-intentioned.¹

The authors/editors of GQ have clearly made the decision that the Bible is nothing more than a book produced by men. Their recommendation was to scrap the Bible and read something else, of their choice, instead. Most people today (even many who claim to be religious) follow this same line of thinking. They may even believe (contrary to GQ's assessment) that the Bible is a good book, and makes good suggestions for living a good life. But they do not believe the Bible is the word of God, and therefore they do not believe that it really has any authoritative value. It cannot, they believe, command them to change the way they live their lives in any way.

The second way of looking at the Bible is to see what it claims for itself. In our previous lesson, we talked about the claims made by the apostle Paul in Ephesians 3. The word written down by him, as he claimed, was the mind of God, delivered through the Holy Spirit. This claim is repeated in other places in scripture:

For this reason we also thank God without ceasing, because when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe (1 Thessalonians 2:13).

You will be brought before governors and kings for My sake, as a testimony to them and to the Gentiles. But when they deliver you up, do not worry about how or what you should speak. For it will be

¹ The Editors of GQ, April 19, 2018: <https://www.gq.com/story/21-books-you-dont-have-to-read>

given to you in that hour what you should speak; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you (Matthew 10:18–20).

It is beyond the scope of this study to delve into evidences for the Bible being the word of God. However, we do need to recognize the distinction between these two views, and realize choosing one view over the other will impact our understanding and implementation of the things that we find in the scriptures. Paul’s encouragement to the Thessalonian brethren was hinged upon their willingness to accept the things that he wrote to them “as...the word of God.” He was very clear that what he wrote did not come from his own mind, but rather from the mind of God. If we approach scripture from this standpoint, we are compelled to view it as authoritative. That is, we come to the conclusion that it has the authority to instruct us in belief and practice.

Recognizing Authority...

Before going very far into this study, we must examine the concept of *authority*. What is authority? What does it mean to have authority? What obligations are there toward those who are in a position of authority?

In Matthew 8, Jesus encountered a centurion in the army who had a sick servant. He asked Jesus to heal his servant, and Jesus agreed to accompany him to the place where his servant was sick. However, the centurion had enough faith in Jesus that he knew Jesus did not need to travel to his servant in order to heal him. The centurion explained his view like this:

The centurion answered and said, “Lord, I am not worthy that You should come under my roof. But only speak a word, and my servant will be healed. For I also am a man under authority, having soldiers under me. And I say to this one, ‘Go,’ and he goes; and to another, ‘Come,’ and he comes; and to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.” (Matthew 8:8–9)

This man understood the idea of *authority*. The word that is translated as *authority* in the New Testament is the Greek word, ἐξουσία (exousia /ex·oo·see·ah). This word means:

1 power of choice, liberty of doing as one pleases. 1A leave or permission. 2 physical and mental power. 2A the ability or strength with which one is endued, which he either possesses or exercises. 3 the power of authority (influence) and of right (privilege). 4 the power of rule or government (the power of him whose will and commands must be submitted to by others and obeyed). 4A universally. 4A1 authority over mankind. 4B specifically. 4B1 the power of judicial decisions. 4B2 of authority to manage domestic affairs. 4C metonymically. 4C1 a thing subject to authority or rule. 4C1A jurisdiction. 4C2 one who possesses authority. 4C2A a ruler, a human magistrate. 4C2B the leading and more powerful among created beings superior to man, spiritual potentates. 4D a sign of the husband’s authority over his wife. 4D1 the veil with which propriety required a women to cover herself. 4E the sign of regal authority, a crown.²

There are many different meanings of this word depending on the context. The centurion in the context under our consideration said that he was a man “under authority.” He helped to define what he meant by declaring, “I say to this one, ‘Go,’ and he goes; and to another, ‘Come,’ and he comes; and to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.” He had “ability or strength...endued, which he either possesses or exercises.” He had been given authority, or power to command the soldiers who were under him. However, notice that he said that he was “under authority.” He was not declaring himself to be the source of authority, but rather, that he had been granted certain power. He was in the military and had command over a certain number of men. As a centurion, there would have typically been 100 men in his company. But, the centurion’s men would be part of a larger group, a cohort,

² Strong, J. (1995). *Enhanced Strong’s Lexicon*. Woodside Bible Fellowship.

which in turn would be part of an even larger group, a legion.³

This explains why this centurion declared that he was “under authority.” Though he had been granted some amount of power, there were those who were over him in the chain of command. So, while he could command those under him and expect their obedience, he also was expected to be obedient to those who were above him.

This example provides some insight into how authority, as a general concept, works. We can look to our own society to see that the principle stands fast today. There are those who have been granted, for one reason or another, power over others. In the work place, a boss is given certain authority, or power, over his employees so that he can give the instructions needed to accomplish the business’ agenda. Teachers in schools are given a certain authority or power to control the learning environment and make it possible to educate children and young adults. Policemen and other law enforcement personnel are given certain authority to control the general populace in order to maintain order and keep the peace. But, in each of these cases, there is an amount of authority that is granted, and the recipients are restrained from exercising more power than they are granted. The sphere of authority is limited in scope to the specific area under consideration. The boss, for example, cannot exercise the same authority as that of the policeman.

Within the realm of their positions, authority gives a person the right to command. While we understand this concept in our day to day lives, it seems that many people don’t accept this reality in the spiritual realm. We want to look at how this idea, the right to command, is especially true in the spiritual realm, and through this study discover who has this right and how it is to be conveyed and applied.

The Need for Authority

When Jesus was teaching in the first century, there was something different about his demeanor and methods. In fact, many of the people who heard Him knew He was not like anyone they had ever heard before. Consider how they responded:

Then they went into Capernaum, and immediately on the Sabbath He entered the synagogue and taught. And they were astonished at His teaching, for He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes (Mark 1:21–22).

Jesus taught as “one having authority,” which set him apart from the scribes who usually did the teaching. The scribes taught from a conferred authority. That is, their authority came from somewhere other than themselves. They could only take what had already been given and seek to explain it. Jesus, on the other hand, spoke with an authority that emanated from himself.

This difference was significant to the audience in Mark 1. It reflected that they understood the need for authority in the religious realm. Jesus’ teaching had to be confirmed in some manner. He could not teach from His own authority unless He could show that He had the right to do so. This right was confirmed by the works that He did (John 10:24-25). He could not do the miraculous works that He did if He did not have authority to speak the words that He spoke. This is a basic fact concerning the working of miracles in the first century (Hebrews 2:1-4).

In fact, Jesus was given “all authority” by the Father, so that He could do His work, and bring His revelation to mankind. In the midst of what we have described as the great commission, Jesus declared His authority, as given to Him by the Father:

³ “centurion”. *Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica Online. Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., 2015. Web. 07 Oct. 2015*
<<http://www.britannica.com/topic/centurion-Roman-military-officer>>.

And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth (Matthew 28:18).

It was on the basis of this authority given to Him that Jesus commanded His disciples to go out into all the world to preach the gospel and make disciples (Matthew 28:19-20). It is this same authority that commands us in all that we believe and practice today! If we recognize Jesus' authority, then we will approach His word, recorded in scripture differently than if we do not recognize His authority. In fact, how we approach His word will reveal whether or not we recognize His authority. If we view the scriptures as merely suggestions, then we do not respect the authority of Christ. If we believe that we have a responsibility to follow the instructions of scripture, then we do respect His authority.

Accepting Truth...

As Jesus was standing before Pilate, as a part of His mock trial, He declared that He was bearing witness to *the truth*. He also said that everyone who was *of the truth* would hear Him. In response to this, Pilate responded: "What is truth?"

Pilate's problem was the same as many who live today. He did not want to accept the idea that absolute *truth* could exist. He did not accept any absolute standard for truth. Therefore, when Jesus began to talk about truth, he was unwilling to accept His words.

Jesus claimed that the words that He brought from the Father comprised *truth*. We must determine whether we accept that truth. If we see what is written as absolute truth, it will impact the manner in which we approach scripture. Consider what Jesus claims for His words:

I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth. As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they also may be sanctified by the truth (John 17:15–19).

As Jesus prayed to the Father, He made it clear that the word that He was proclaiming, that word that had come from the Father, was truth. Earlier, we saw how Paul described the revelation he received from the Holy Spirit. John recorded that Jesus identified the Spirit who would bring the word to the apostles as "the Spirit of truth."

"If you love Me, keep My commandments. And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever—the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you. I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you (John 14:15–18).

"But when the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me (John 15:26).

"I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you. All things that the Father has are Mine. Therefore I said that He will take of Mine and declare it to you (John 16:12–15).

That which was delivered from God, through Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, was identified as truth. It is this truth that will lead to a relationship with God, and set men free from the bondage of sin.

Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, "If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." They answered Him, "We

are Abraham's descendants, and have never been in bondage to anyone. How can You say, 'You will be made free'?" Jesus answered them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin. And a slave does not abide in the house forever, but a son abides forever. Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed (John 8:31–36).

Jesus' claim for His own words, and the words revealed through the Holy Spirit (the scriptures) is that they are truth. That is absolute. If they are truth, then anything contrary to them, by necessity, cannot be truth!

Absolute Truth, Absolute Authority

How we approach the scriptures will impact how we apply them. If we do not believe there is any absolute standard of truth, then we will never come to agreement on faith or practice. All applications will be arbitrary, or subjective. We will have no objective way of taking what is written and putting it into effective practice. Anything we do not like is merely dismissed as unimportant. This is, it seems, the approach that many in the religious world take when studying and applying the scriptures. This approach, however, stands in contrast to the claims that we have seen Jesus Himself make concerning the scriptures.

If we approach the scriptures as being the absolute truth, we then perceive the message much differently. If the scriptures contain absolute truth as revealed from the mind of God, then they also bear absolute authority. If God exists, and if God has revealed His mind to His creation, then He has the absolute authority to command that creation. What other option would exist? Can the creation usurp the authority of the creator? Certainly not!

Woe to those who seek deep to hide their counsel far from the LORD, And their works are in the dark; They say, "Who sees us?" and, "Who knows us?" Surely you have things turned around! Shall the potter be esteemed as the clay; For shall the thing made say of him who made it, "He did not make me"? Or shall the thing formed say of him who formed it, "He has no understanding" (Isaiah 29:15–16)?

If we accept the scriptures as absolute truth, with absolute authority, then we must conform ourselves to what we find therein. It is foolishness to claim we accept their right command us, and then refuse to be obedient to the things we find in them! James addressed this very mindset:

Therefore lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls. But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does (James 1:21–25).

Our acceptance of the word of God as truth, and as authoritative will be made manifest through our actions. If we continue to rebel against the word of the Lord, refusing to be obedient to its instruction, we clearly do not respect its truth, or its authority. However, when we submit humbly to its every instruction, we show that we really believe it to be truth, and we really believe it has the right to command us. That is the approach to the Bible that will be beneficial to us, both in the present life and in the one that is to come!

Questions

1. What is *authority*? How is the concept of authority significant to our understanding of the scriptures?
2. Describe at least two ways that people today view the authority of the scriptures.
3. What does it mean that Jesus “taught as one having authority”? Why was it important for the people that He taught to recognize this?
4. How did Pilate view the concept of *truth* when he was trying Jesus?
5. What claims did Jesus make about the words that He presented?
6. What did Jesus call the Holy Spirit whom He would send once He ascended into Heaven? What did Jesus say the Holy Spirit would bring for the apostles?
7. If we accept that the Bible is true, and that it is authoritative, how are our reactions to its teaching impacted?

Our Purpose in Bible Study

Why do we take the time to study the Bible? The answer to that question is often different for different people. People will turn to the study of scripture for different reasons, some of which are not intended for the seeking out of truth. Sometimes, we may not even know why we are searching the scriptures, without a serious self examination. We have to evaluate our own motivation for studying the word of God. We will be considering many of the reasons that people study the Bible with this lesson. We also will be examining the purpose everyone should have for studying the Bible. If we aren't studying for the right reasons, then our study will not really do us any good! First, let us consider many of the reasons that people study the bible:

An Intellectual Endeavor

Some people study the scriptures only to gain intellectual knowledge. They do not have any belief in the writings found therein, and they certainly will not take its instruction to heart. It is merely another book of literature, just like any other. There are, after all, many universities that provide instruction in Bible, as taught by atheistic professors.

There are many professed Christians that approach their Bible study in a similar manner. They are not concerned about truth, or pleasing the Lord. They are concerned about knowing more than other people. They are trying to amass knowledge, just for knowledge's sake. While biblical knowledge is important, it is only important for the sake of application! When we know something, but do not see the authoritative value of it, that knowledge will not change our lives.

Study to Prove Others Wrong

Sometimes, it seems that people study the scriptures just for the pleasure of proving someone else wrong. This is closely related to studying simply for an intellectual endeavor. Some people just relish the idea of telling others how wrong they think they are. Quite often, much time is spent gathering trivia, and insignificant facts, for purpose of stumping other people, especially spiritual leaders (preachers or elders, etc.). We become so convinced we are right, that we go to the scriptures only to show that others are not right.

Study to Prove the Bible Wrong

There are some who go to the Bible in order to try and prove it wrong. They will spend hours upon hours in study to try to find anything that they can criticize, to show that it is not correct. They believe that if they can find any kind of discrepancy, then they have disproved the whole of the book. While we will take a look at proposed contradictions within the scriptures later in our study, it is worth pointing out at this juncture that true contradictions could be a real problem for the integrity of the scriptures. However, those who approach scripture with this type of a motivation will never consider that they may be missing something that would correct their understanding of a proposed contradiction. If something appears to be inaccurate from a cursory examination, they use it to reject the whole of scripture. There have been many "scholars" who have spent their entire adult lives studying the Bible for the sole purpose of proving that it was not the word of God, but rather the construct of man.

Study for Selfishness

Sometimes people study just to make themselves feel more important than others around them. They seem to believe that if they can cite or quote a passage faster or more accurately than someone else, they are more correct. They become puffed up in how much knowledge that they have acquired. Paul warned the Philippian brethren that they should never function out of selfishness, but rather esteem others better than themselves (Philippians 2:1-11).

If our study of the scriptures becomes all about us, then we are approaching them for purely selfish reasons. It should not be about pride in how much we know, but rather it should be about conforming ourselves to what God wants us to be. The difference is the first is selfish, the latter is selfless.

Study to Prove What We Already Believe

Quite often, people go to the scriptures with a prejudice. They know what they already believe, and jump into a study of the scriptures to find proof for their already held belief. This can be a hard barrier to overcome. After all, if we believe something, that belief had to come from somewhere! We are convinced that our deeply held belief must have come from previous study in scripture. So, we return to the scripture with an already prejudiced mind, and look for the passages that seem to teach what we already believe. We then ignore the passages that might stand in opposition to our held belief. If this is our motivation, then we will have great difficulty in coming to the truth.

Study to Prove What We Want to Believe

Maybe we go to scripture without knowing anything about what it teaches on a particular topic, but we know what we *want* to believe on that topic. This problem happens frequently in our current society that allows what is socially acceptable to frame all morality. People establish general principles for what they want to be true, and then, because they also want to be identified as believers, they turn to scripture to try and formulate support for what they want to be true. This leads to the twisting of scriptures, often using a passage that condemns a certain practice to support that very practice! Peter warned back in the first century that there would be those who twisted the scriptures to their own destruction (2 Peter 3:14-16).

It has been said that the Bible can be used to prove anything. When we start with a belief that we are intent on defending, we can probably find some passage to twist in a way that supports our belief. If our motivation is to prove what we want to believe, then we will end up mishandling and misusing the word of God.

All of these reasons for studying the scriptures are not helpful to true understanding of the word of God. However, it is extremely difficult to check our prejudices, and keep them from interfering with true, beneficial study. That is a talent that takes a lot of work, and a lot of self evaluation. In most cases, unless we do something that would expose our poor motivation, others will not be able to see or help us correct these faults. We have a responsibility to look at our own hearts, and determine why we are studying God's word. Our motivation for studying God's word will impact the outcome of our study.

Importance of Knowledge...

Before we turn to the right motivation for studying scripture, it is crucial for us to understand that knowledge is of vital importance. Perhaps it would be easy to dismiss the need for the right knowledge because there are so many poor motivations for attaining that knowledge. However, the New Testament writers make it abundantly clear that attaining the right knowledge, for the right rea-

sons, is of great importance. In fact, Paul emphasized the need to attain knowledge in an effort to become more like Christ. This makes perfect sense! How can we become more like Christ if we do not know what He was like?

And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ... (Ephesians 4:11–13).

Knowledge was so important, God provided it as one of the miraculous spiritual gifts of the first century church:

And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all. But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all: for to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, to another the word of knowledge through the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healings by the same Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another discerning of spirits, to another different kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually as He wills (1 Corinthians 12:6–11).

Love never fails. But whether there are prophecies, they will fail; whether there are tongues, they will cease; whether there is knowledge, it will vanish away (1 Corinthians 13:8).

Our intent is not to minimize the importance of attaining knowledge at all! It is quite important to work diligently to attain “knowledge of the Son of God.” But, if our approach to gaining knowledge is askew, then we will never grow to be like Christ.

So then, what should our approach to studying the scriptures be? Why do we spend time studying the Bible? Let us consider just a few ideas that should frame our approach to the scriptures.

Study to Show Yourself Approved...

First, we should return to the opening premise of our study, and the verse from which we have taken the title of this study:

Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15 KJV).

As we have already discussed, the New King James, and other modern translations, use the phrase, “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God...” The idea is the same. We diligently spend time with God’s revealed word so that we might present ourselves approved unto Him. We are not trying to please men, but rather we are seeking to please the Lord. Paul addressed this very problem in Galatians 1. The brethren he was writing to were intent on requiring Gentile Christians to first follow the Law of Moses. They were preaching a different gospel than what had been delivered to them by Paul. After instructing them that they needed to avoid any gospel that was different than what they had already received, Paul addressed what might be the motivation for those who would teach those different gospels:

For do I now persuade men, or God? Or do I seek to please men? For if I still pleased men, I would not be a bondservant of Christ. (Galatians 1:10)

Paul refused to fall into the trap of teaching a message that was designed to appeal to men. He was determined that he would work to please the Lord, of which he was a bondservant, or slave.

God has provided all that we need to be pleasing to Him. He has not, however, said that pleasing

Him is an easy task. It will take work to please Him. It will take diligence in our handling of His word to please Him. Our goal, each and every time we approach His word, should be to learn what He would want of us!

Study to Learn Obedience...

Before we can be obedient, we must know what the will of the Lord is. Jesus Himself declared that His purpose was to fulfill the will of God:

Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to finish His work (John 4:34).

Jesus knew what the will of the Father was, and He was dedicated to being completely obedient to that will. He learned to be completely obedient to that will:

As He also says in another place: "You are a priest forever According to the order of Melchizedek"; who, in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of His godly fear, though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered. (Hebrews 5:6–8)

That complete obedience is what God expects of us today as well. We need to follow the example of Christ, and come to full submission before Him. As Jesus was preparing to leave the earth after His resurrection, He gave this instruction to His disciples:

"All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:18–20).

In these final instructions, Jesus told His disciples that they were to "make disciples" and then that they were to teach them "to observe all things that I have commanded you..." Jesus wanted His disciples to convey a particular attitude to all the people to whom they taught the gospel. They were to teach that true disciples would have the attitude that they would observe "all things" that were commanded by the Lord. It would take a lot of time get to everything that was taught by Jesus, as well as everything that was revealed through the Holy Spirit. Eventually, all of that would be taught. However, it did not (and does not) take much time to teach the principle that we must be submissive to everything that God has revealed! If this principle is established, then we will approach scripture in a humble, submissive, and obedient manner. When we study, we will never be rebellious against what we read. Sometimes, we study and find some instruction that God has for us, and then we work to decide if we will accept it and obey it. If we have learned the principle that Jesus was teaching here, that will never be the case. If we have truly adopted this premise, we will have already decided to be obedient to whatever teaching we find in God's will.

Study to Grow to Be More Like Christ...

Earlier, we saw how we needed knowledge to know what it meant to be like Christ. As we consider our approach to scripture, it is imperative that we understand the need to put what we learn from scripture into practice. It is not good enough to just know about Christ. We have to take what we learn, and make it a part of our lives, so that we are becoming more and more like Christ every day. Study, without practical changes will be pointless.

But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be

blessed in what he does (James 1:22–25).

We should be learning more and more about the will of God every day. The more we learn, the more we should be adding to our lives. If we are not willing to make direct applications to our own lives, then all the studying in the world will never make a difference to our spiritual lives.

We should have goals that we have set in our studies. At the top of that list, we should be trying to grow to be as much like the Lord as we can be. He has been set before us as an example. We should want to be like Him, and we should do whatever is necessary to grow to be like Him. That starts with the acquisition of knowledge, and then requires the application of that knowledge. We have to know what He was like, and then we have to begin to act like Him. If we are failing to conform our lives to His example, then we are failing at our study efforts!

Study To Teach Others...

Not only do we need to be like the Lord, but as we learn more about being like Him, we need to teach others to do so as well. It is not good enough for us to be content with being faithful to Him. We have a responsibility to share the good news of the gospel so that others can enjoy His eternal spiritual blessings as well. Paul told Timothy that he had the responsibility of teaching others, who would then have the same responsibility:

And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also (2 Timothy 2:2).

This principle is at the very heart of the great commission given by Jesus to His disciples (Matthew 28:18-20, previous page). They were to “make disciples.” They taught the gospel message which would bring the hearers to obedience (“baptizing them...”). It would be natural for those who were truly disciples to go forth and share the good news of salvation with others. That is exactly what we see happening, with the gospel spreading quickly from Jerusalem after the day of Pentecost in the book of Acts. The spread of the gospel takes place today in the same manner. Those who are truly converted will study in such a way as to be able to share the things they learn with others!

There are probably more reasons that can be given for studying the scriptures, but most can be summarized under these basic concepts. It is important for us to have the right reasons for studying God’s word, so that we come to understand His mind as He would have us to do. If we accept the scriptures as they are in truth, the word of God, then we will respond to them in the way that God requires. If we refuse to honestly evaluate and apply what we read there, then we are showing that we do not accept them as truly being the word of God, no matter what we might claim!

Questions

1. List at least 3 reasons that some people study the Bible that would not be beneficial to them for spiritual growth.
2. Why do you think it is so important to some people to prove the beliefs of others wrong? Is it wrong to use scripture to show when a belief or practice is incorrect?
3. Is acquiring knowledge from scripture important? How can this acquisition become bad?
4. List at least 3 reasons that we should be diligent about studying the scriptures.
5. How do we grow to be more like Christ? How important is this responsibility?
6. If we are not fulfilling our obligations as Christians, does continual study benefit us? Why or why not?
7. Add to the lesson: What other reasons (good or bad) would you add to this lesson for studying the scriptures?

What Am I Reading Here?

The Bible is a truly amazing book! There is, in fact, nothing comparable to it. Consider that it is comprised of 66 individual books, split between the Old Testament and the New Testament. It was written over a period of approximately 1500 years, with 40 different human authors. There is, however, one message or theme that runs from the beginning to the end, which confirms that there is only one true author: God! As we examine this amazing compilation of books, we find that it is full of several different types of writing. We can divide the various books up into several genres of literature. Quite often, our understanding of the text will rely upon us knowing what type of literature we are examining. For example, we will not think of poetic language being the same as factual history. Just like we interpret different types of literature in different ways in our society today, so we must with the scriptures as well.

History...

There is much written in the scriptures that would be classified as *history*. In fact, the Old Testament scriptures are the most complete history of the Jewish people available to us. Because of the nature of the scriptures, and the claims they make for themselves, many desire or even require that the history found therein be confirmed by other secular sources. However, where extra-biblical evidence has been recovered, it has confirmed the account found in scripture.

The Old Testament begins with what is known as the Pentateuch, or “the book of five.” All of these contain a history of mankind through what we know as the Patriarchal period of man’s history. This covers the time of creation (Genesis 1-2) up through the time of Moses and the giving of the Law of Moses. Included in these early passages are several genealogies which help us to connect the generations of men from creation through important historical events. For example, the first of these appears in Genesis chapter 5, and ties together the time of creation (Adam) with the flood (Noah). These same types of genealogies are found in other places of scripture, but fulfill the same basic purpose. Through these family lines, the inspired writers will connect multiple periods of history together. Matthew, for example, provides a genealogy for Jesus in Matthew chapter 1. There, he connected Abraham to David, David to the Babylonian captivity, and the Babylonian captivity to Jesus. These were all significant times, and people, to the Jewish people.

There are several other books of the Old Testament that are predominantly historical. While whole books may be classified as a particular type of writing, we should be aware of the fact that the different genres are often interspersed among the books. For example, part of the Pentateuch would be classified as *law*, and yet parts of those books also record history for us. The book of Job is primarily written in poetic form, and yet it too contains history. Understanding the nature of these different genres, and how the ideas are expressed, will help us to understand the meaning of these passages!

Most of the Old Testament writings from Joshua to Esther fall into the category of *history*. We learn about how the children of Israel ended up in the land of Canaan, and about their rebellion against the Lord. We learn about the coming of their human kings, and how the nation was divided into two kingdoms. We learn about nature of their kings through time, and how their wickedness led to the fall of both of these nations. We read about the northern kingdom of Israel being taken into the

Assyrian captivity, only to be followed by their sister nation, Judah, into the Babylonian captivity. We read about the return from captivity, and the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. We can follow the history of the people of Israel for several hundred years, through their successes and failures. Through it all, we get a glimpse of how God interacted with His people. We are able to see what His expectations for them was, and we can learn what type of expectations He has for mankind today as well.

In the New Testament, there are 5 books that can be at least loosely classified as *history*. We say “loosely classified as history” because the first four are the gospels (Matthew-John) which are full of history, but are also full of instruction. They do, however, reveal the history of the life of Christ. The fifth book of history is the book of Acts. Acts is more of what we think of as traditional history. Luke records for us the history of the Apostles in the early church, most notably the work of Peter and Paul. Through the book of Acts, we learn of the establishment of the church, as well as its spread throughout the world. We are able to watch the work of Paul as he traveled around the world starting new local churches through the preaching of the gospel message. We are able to see what the church looked like under the tutelage of the apostles. This view into the working of the early church is invaluable to us. Knowing what the early church looked like, under the direct instruction of God’s inspired men, shows us what the church is supposed to look like today as well. Without the history of the book of Acts, it would be impossible for us to know what God wanted His church to look like for all time!

When we study history, we understand its nature. This type of literature serves the purpose of revealing facts about the various periods of time that we are studying. We look at the inspired history of the Bible in the same way that we look at histories written by men today. They are recording events as they happened, so that readers throughout time will be able to know what happened. Because the scriptures were inspired by God, we can have confidence in their historical accuracy.

Poetry...

A significant portion of the scriptures is written in poetic form. All of the books from Job to Song of Solomon are classified as poetry. There are, however, some significant differences among these books. For example, the book of Job contains history, and is formatted as prose for the introductory chapters. When the dialogue begins in chapter 3, the form changes from prose to poetry. This stands in contrast with books such as Psalms and Proverbs, that are more purely poetic.

Unfortunately, we often lose the beauty of the poetic language when translations occur from the original language. Think, for example, how words which may rhyme in one language will not rhyme when translated to another language. Changes in the number of syllables from one language to another may also change the meter or rhythm of the poetic verse. Because of these necessary changes in translation, we often lose the form of the original poetry, and therefore lose the beauty of the verse. It is, however, important to realize that we do not lose the meaning of the passages. We can understand what was written. In many of the modern translations, the translators tried to capture the form of the poetry, which gives us some insight into how these passages would have been seen by the original audiences.

When examining poetry, it is important to realize that it must be examined differently than other forms of literature, such as history. While the historical books are a recording of facts, and the language included should typically taken as literal, the same is not true for poetry. We understand this premise when examining literature in our society. We read and interpret a history book in a completely different way to how we read and interpret a book of poetry. This is because we understand how language is used! When we read a book of poetry, we do not expect that the author is setting

down a series of facts. Instead, we understand that he is writing creatively, and to understand what is in his mind, we are tasked with interpreting his creative style. In a future lesson, we will spend more time examining various literary devices that are used in poetry.

Instruction...

For our purposes, we will identify instructional writings as those through which God has specifically identified the actions He wants from His people. Throughout the Old Testament, the writings that were generally identified as “the Law” would fall into this type of writing. Throughout the books of Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, God was very specific with His instructions for the Israelites. In fact, while many people think that the Ten Commandments incorporated all of God’s instructions for His people, we find that they were only the tip of the iceberg of what God expected! He left no stone unturned when it came to the behavior of His people.

Instructive writing was not limited, however, to these books of Law in the Pentateuch. Throughout the Old Testament, God spoke to His people giving them specific instructions to control their actions. In fact, He would, on many occasions, tell them specifically when to act, and when not to act. A good example of this can be found in the book of Exodus, when the people were wandering in the wilderness after their disobedience (they refused to enter the promised land when God told them to go). God led them by appearing in the form of a cloud by day, and a pillar of fire by night. When the cloud lifted from the camp, God was telling them that it was time to travel. When it remained, He was telling them that they were to remain camped (Numbers 9:15-23). There are many instances interspersed through the Old Testament scriptures where God gave specific instructions to either an individual or groups of people (including the nation as a whole). In each case, it is evident that God expected to be obeyed! That was not always the case, but it was always the expectation.

In the New Testament, instruction was typically delivered in the form of *epistles*. Epistles were letters written from an inspired author to either an individual or a group of people (such as a local church). Several men wrote the epistles we find in our Bibles. Paul, Peter, James and John all wrote letters of instruction that have been canonized (i.e., added to the scriptures). Most of what we read in these letters are either reminders to continue doing what had already been delivered to them, or corrections in areas where they had strayed from the instructions that had been delivered. In any case, the written word was almost always a reminder of instruction that the recipients had received at some point in their past. This is why Paul could write a passage like the following to the Galatian brethren:

I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel, which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed (Galatians 1:6–9).

While the New Testament is not comprised of books of law, such as the Old Testament was, it is nonetheless full of instruction. The inspired writers conveyed what was in the mind of God (Ephesians 3), including His expectations for the actions of His people. While there is no list of commandments, there are many passages describing the nature of the child of God, and subsequently the behavior of that child. Some want to use the absence of a “Ten Commandments like passage” to dismiss any existence of a law under the New Covenant. There are far too many passages that provide instructions (both “thou shall” and “thou shalt not” in nature) to think that God does not expect obedience. In fact, there are several passages in the New Testament scriptures that clearly indicate that a failure to conform behavior to God’s instructions will keep one out of the kingdom of

Heaven. We will present one here for illustration, but will return to this idea in a later study on the epistles:

Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God (1 Corinthians 6:9–11).

While this may not constitute a “list of commandments” as compared with the Old Testament commands, it is clear that the instructions are present. One cannot participate in these sins and inherit the kingdom of God. Therefore, it is evident that God was delivering instructions to avoid those sinful practices! In delivering these instructions, He intended for His people to be obedient. There are, after all, severe consequences for disobedience! One who does not “inherit the kingdom of God” cannot be saved, nor spend eternity with God in Heaven.

The writings contained in the epistles ensure that we can understand what God expects of us. He has revealed His mind, including the consequences for disobedience. These instructions must be followed if we are to have a relationship with Him, and with His people!

Prophecy...

Another type of biblical literature is prophecy. A prophet, in the simplest form, is simply one who speaks for another. This word, for example was used to identify the relationship between Moses and Aaron:

So the LORD said to Moses: “See, I have made you as God to Pharaoh, and Aaron your brother shall be your prophet (Exodus 7:1).

When used in relationship with God, the prophet is an inspired person, revealing the word of the Lord. The Old Testament is full of prophets speaking for God. These men often were proclaiming instruction that God wanted men to conform to. Consider, for example, the prophet Jonah. His message was one of repentance, calling for the people of Nineveh to give up their wickedness and return to serving the Lord. Much of what we read in books like Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel are quite similar in nature. God’s messenger would call for the repentance of the people, pleading with them to return to faithful service. In this sense, any person who spoke on behalf of God, providing any kind of instruction could be identified as a prophet, and could be said to be bringing prophecy. However, there is a different way in which we often think of this word as well.

Most often, we think of the prophets as being those who would tell what would happen in the future. Certainly, that was an important part of the work that they would do. Not only would these men deliver instruction, but they would tell what would happen in the future based upon the people’s response to that instruction. Once again, consider the prophecies of men like Isaiah. Isaiah, some 150 years before the event, named Cyrus as the man who would be responsible for the return of the people of God from the Babylonian captivity. He named the ruler who would return the people from a captivity that they had not yet entered (See Isaiah 44:28)! The only way to be able to prophecy the future with such specificity is through divine inspiration. Only God can know the future so well as to tell exactly what would happen.

There were those who claimed to be prophets of God, but who were false prophets. The people needed to know how to distinguish between the true (those who should be obeyed) and the false (those who should be ignored). It would be imperative for the people to be able to tell the difference between the two! God gave instructions that would help them to know when a prophet was

true, and when a prophet was false:

But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in My name, which I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die.’ And if you say in your heart, ‘How shall we know the word which the LORD has not spoken?’—when a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the thing does not happen or come to pass, that is the thing which the LORD has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him (Deuteronomy 18:20–22).

Also, consider these instructions:

“If there arises among you a prophet or a dreamer of dreams, and he gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or the wonder comes to pass, of which he spoke to you, saying, ‘Let us go after other gods’—which you have not known—‘and let us serve them,’ you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams, for the LORD your God is testing you to know whether you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul. You shall walk after the LORD your God and fear Him, and keep His commandments and obey His voice; you shall serve Him and hold fast to Him. But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has spoken in order to turn you away from the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of bondage, to entice you from the way in which the LORD your God commanded you to walk. So you shall put away the evil from your midst (Deuteronomy 13:1–5).

So, if a prophet spoke something different than what God has already revealed, or something that was directly contrary to His previous instructions, that man could be identified as false, even if he performed some great sign that seemed to confirm his word. Secondly, if a prophet claimed that a message came from God, but then his word did not come true, he could be identified as false. God would never be wrong! If He sent His word through the mouth of a man, it would come to pass!

Apocalyptic...

Apocalyptic literature is a subset of the previous class of literature (prophecy). It is, however, important to set it aside and discuss it on its own because of its difficulty and impact on our understanding of scripture.

Apocalyptic literature is a special type of prophecy that addresses the ultimate battle between good and evil, God and Satan. It is written in a more cryptic, or symbolic manner, making its interpretation far more difficult. It seems that this is the one type of literature that draws the attention of many new Bible students! It is understandable (as is all the Bible) but must be evaluated and studied in its context.

There are sections of the books of Ezekiel and Daniel that are classified as Apocryphal. Perhaps the most well known section of Apocryphal literature in scripture is the book of Revelation. John very clearly identified his work in that book as being signs, rather than straight forward, literal language:

The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show His servants—things which must shortly take place. And He sent and signified it by His angel to His servant John, who bore witness to the word of God, and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, to all things that he saw (Revelation 1:1–2).

This type of literature relies extensively on *figurative language*. Of course, there are other places in scripture that also use figurative language, and we will examine that in more detail in the next lesson. Here, we should realize that when reading apocalyptic literature, the language is often figurative, and to take it literally would most certainly lead to a false conclusion. For example, there are many who are looking for the events of the book of Revelation to come to pass, and yet John did say (in his introductory and therefore literal comments) that these things would “shortly take

place.” Taking the whole book out of the context in which it was written to devise a doctrine that appeals to us is not fair to God’s word, or to the men that gave their lives to reveal it for us!

Final Considerations...

As we prepare to study the scriptures, there are a couple of things to keep in mind. First, it is important to remember that studying scripture is not much different than studying other literature. There are some basic premises from which we operate, to ensure that we come away with proper understanding. If we are studying poetry, we understand that we look at it differently than if we are studying history. If we try to insist on looking at poetry exactly as history, it will be nearly impossible to comprehend its meaning!

Second, we must remember that it is our responsibility to interpret the scriptures as the writers intended for them to be interpreted. If we take their words out of context, and make applications or come up with doctrines that they never intended, then we have not come to understand the text. If we read more into a text than the author intended, then we have misinterpreted his words. Keep in mind that the ultimate author of all the text is God. If we have not come to understand His word in the manner He intends, then we still have work to do.

And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts; knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. (2 Peter 1:19–21)

Questions...

1. How many individual books make up the Bible? How many different human authors are responsible for writing?
2. What 5 types of literature were discussed in this lesson?
3. What Biblical books would be considered Poetry?
4. What is a prophet? For whom were the prophets of scripture speaking?
5. How do the instructive books of the New Testament differ from those in the Old Testament? Why do you think this is true?
6. What is Apocalyptic literature? What Biblical books would fall into this category?
7. What makes Apocalyptic literature difficult to interpret?
8. How is interpreting the Bible the same as interpreting other literature? How is it different?

What's *Really* Figurative?

With this lesson, we want to examine in a little more depth some of the principles that were introduced in the previous lesson. Most notably, we want to look at the difference in the use of literal and figurative language in the scriptures.

How often has the question been asked: “Do you think the Bible is literal or figurative?” This question reveals that the person asking the question does not have any kind of understanding of the nature of the Bible. This question treats the Bible as if it is one, independent work. While the Bible indeed comes from one source (God), it is actually a compilation of 66 individual books, as we have seen in previous lessons. Those books are comprised of several different genres of literature (see Lesson 4). Because there are numerous genres included in scripture, it is vital to understand that there are differences in the way that words are used. To answer the question above, the answer is, “Yes!” There are sections of the scripture that are clearly literal. *Literal* means:

lit•er•al | 'li-t(ə-)rəl| *adjective*

[Middle English, from Middle French, from Medieval Latin *litteralis*, from Latin, of a letter, from *littera* letter] 14th century

1 *a: according with the letter of the scriptures*

b: adhering to fact or to the ordinary construction or primary meaning of a term or expression: ACTUAL <liberty in the literal sense is impossible—B. N Cardozo>

c: free from exaggeration or embellishment <the literal truth>

d: characterized by a concern mainly with facts <a very literal man>

2: *of, relating to, or expressed in letters*

3: *reproduced word for word: EXACT, VERBATIM <a literal translation>—lit•er•al•i•ty* |,li-tə-'ra-lə-tē| *noun*—*lit•er•al•ness* | 'li-t(ə-)rəl-nəs| *noun*¹

When we see passages of scripture as literal, we believe that the author is recording things as they happened. Sometimes, these may be unbelievable events to the human, secular mind. Accounts such as that of Jonah and Great Fish, for example, are often considered to be fictional accounts, fables with moral stories. However, there is nothing in the passages that would suggest that this account is anything except a factual account of events as they happened. Yes, Jonah was *literally* swallowed by a great fish, and then later vomited out on dry land!

On the other hand, there are also sections of scripture that are clearly figurative. Figurative means:

fig•u•ra•tive | 'fi-g(y)ə-rə-tiv| *adjective*

14th century

1 *a: representing by a figure or resemblance: EMBLEMATIC*

b: of or relating to representation of form or figure in art <figurative sculpture>

¹ Merriam-Webster, Inc. Merriam-Webster's collegiate dictionary. 2003 : n. pag. Print.

2 a: expressing one thing in terms normally denoting another with which it may be regarded as analogous: METAPHORICAL <figurative language>

b: characterized by figures of speech <a figurative description>—fig•u•ra•tive•ly adverb—fig•u•ra•tive•ness noun²

Much of the poetic books of scripture are written in figurative language. In a few moments, we will take a look at some more specific examples of this, but for the time being, consider David's writing in Psalm 23:

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; For You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me (Psalm 23:4).

Clearly, as David penned this stunning verse, he did not intend the reader to think that there was a literal "valley of the shadow of death" that could be marked on a map. He was using figurative language to express an idea that he was facing difficult circumstances and that God was there to help him.

How do we know?

If the Bible has both literal and figurative passages, how are we to know which is which? It is, of course, very important to recognize the difference between the two. Deciding something is either *literal* or *figurative* is not an arbitrary decision. There are, in fact, textual clues that will help to determine this in the context. While we will spend a significant amount of time discussing how to approach a given context in a future lesson, it is imperative at this juncture to understand that textual clues to a literal or figurative interpretation can be found within the immediate context of a passage. This is not unlike any other type of literature that one might read. There are different literary devices that can be used by the author to express his intent. An author can express himself in a literal way, i.e., simply telling the facts (as in history). Or he can express himself in a more creative, figurative way. Most of the literary devices that are present in secular writing are also present in the biblical text. Let's take some time to consider some of these literary devices, as found in scripture

Simile. A simile is a figure of speech comparing two unlike things that is often introduced by like or as.³ This type of comparison is easy to spot, as it uses a connective phrase, such as *like* or *as*. When used, the author is clearly not identifying the first part of the phrase as being literally the second. Consider this passage:

The place in the Scripture which he read was this: "He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; And as a lamb before its shearer is silent, So He opened not His mouth..." (Acts 8:32)"

As the Eunuch was reading this prophetic passage, he could not figure out who was being discussed in the passage from Isaiah 53. He knew that it was not a literal sheep being led to the slaughter, but rather a man, who was to be led like a sheep to slaughter. The comparison of the man being led to his death was made clear by the well understood imagery of a sheep being led to the slaughter. A simile shows similarity between the two phrases. In this example, the man was literally being led to His death, but the figure of a sheep led to slaughter is used to emphasize the action.

Metaphor. A metaphor is very similar to a simile. Metaphor is defined as: a figure of speech in which a word or phrase literally denoting one kind of object or idea is used in place of another to suggest a likeness or analogy between them (as in drowning in money) broadly: figurative language.⁴ Rather than using the connective phrases as or like (as in a simile), metaphors make a more direct compar-

2 Merriam-Webster, Inc. Merriam-Webster's collegiate dictionary. 2003 : n. pag. Print.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

ison. Consider the following passage as an example:

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want (Psalm 23:1).

This psalm is quite well known, and is full of literary devices. This metaphor identifies God as a shepherd, and therefore His faithful people as sheep. Neither of these are literally true, but rather serve as a figure of the relationship between God and His people. We certainly do not expect to see the Lord literally standing in a field, dressed as a shepherd!

Personification. Personification is defined as: attribution of personal qualities especially: representation of a thing or abstraction as a person or by the human form.⁵ More simply put, *personification* is giving of human attributes to non-human entities. This is a literary device that is used extensively in poetic passages. One of the most dramatic examples is found in the descriptions of wisdom as given by the wise man, Solomon, in the Proverbs.

Wisdom has built her house, She has hewn out her seven pillars; She has slaughtered her meat, She has mixed her wine, She has also furnished her table. She has sent out her maidens, She cries out from the highest places of the city, "Whoever is simple, let him turn in here!" As for him who lacks understanding, she says to him, "Come, eat of my bread And drink of the wine I have mixed. Forsake foolishness and live, And go in the way of understanding" (Proverbs 9:1–6).

Here, Solomon has given wisdom the characteristics of a person. Wisdom cannot literally build a house, or slaughter meat, etc. Clearly, when this device is used, it is intended to convey a figurative idea, rather than depict a literal scene.

Anthropomorphism. Anthropomorphism is defined as: an interpretation of what is not human or personal in terms of human or personal characteristics: HUMANIZATION.⁶ This is quite similar to personification, but is usually used in relation to God. That is, Anthropomorphism is typically a special type of personification in which human characteristics are attributed to God so that we might be able to more easily, or fully understand Him. Consider:

The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous, And His ears are open to their cry. The face of the LORD is against those who do evil, To cut off the remembrance of them from the earth (Psalm 34:15–16).

Here, the psalmist gives human characteristics to God, making Him more “relatable” to man. That does not indicate that God literally has these characteristics! He is Spirit, not flesh, and so He does not literally possess these characteristics of humans.

Many will include various human emotions and actions as being a literary device when used of God. While this may be true on occasion, part of the issue becomes determining what characteristics are uniquely human. For example, for one to assume that describing God as “jealous” is an anthropomorphism, one would have to show that “jealousy” is a uniquely human characteristic, and that God does not actually exhibit that (or any) emotion. As this is impossible to show, attributing God’s emotion to merely “figurative language” is not a fair representation.

Allusion. An allusion is defined as: 1: an implied or indirect reference especially in literature also: the use of such references. 2: the act of alluding to or hinting at something.⁷ An allusion is a literary device where the author (or speaker) mentions something that will make the reader/hearer think of something else. It is intended to draw the mind to something familiar, so that it might help to explain the actions of the immediate context. This was effectively used by Jesus, while on the cross. At one point, He cried out:

5 *Ibid.*

6 *Ibid.*

7 *Ibid.*

“Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?” which is translated, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” (Mark 15:34)

Jesus was calling the mind of the informed back to Psalm 22, a psalm that declared the coming Messiah, and the suffering that He would endure. Jesus’ cry was a declaration that He was fulfilling the prophecies!

Metonymy. Metonymy is defined as: a figure of speech consisting of the use of the name of one thing for that of another of which it is an attribute or with which it is associated.⁸ An example of this would be using the word “crown” for “king”, such as, “The vineyards belong to the crown.” The land, in this example, would not literally belong to the crown that sits on the king’s head, but rather to the king himself. The term *crown* is used to identify the king.

A Biblical example of this can be found in Paul’s instructions concerning the Lord’s Supper:

In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.” For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death till He comes (1 Corinthians 11:25–26).

One would not literally drink the cup itself. Rather, the cup stands for the contents that are found therein. There was no importance placed upon the cup itself. Paul wanted them to know that when they drank the fruit of the vine, they were declaring the Lord’s death till He comes.

Notice that with Metonymy, the two things that are used interchangeably are not at all similar in nature. A king and a crown are two completely different things, just as a cup and its contents are completely different. Even so, we easily see the connection between the two elements, and we are able to understand the author’s intent. No one thinks that Paul was instructing that the cup used in the Lord’s supper was somehow supposed to be processed so that it could be drunk! It is evident that he was addressing the fruit of the vine that was contained in the cup.

Synecdoche. Synecdoche is defined as: a figure of speech by which a part is put for the whole (as fifty sail for fifty ships), the whole for a part (as society for high society), the species for the genus (as cutthroat for assassin), the genus for the species (as a creature for a man), or the name of the material for the thing made (as boards for stage)⁹

Synecdoche is used quite often both in our spoken and written language. For example, a rancher might declare that he has “2000 head of cattle.” He does not mean that he has literally 2000 bovine heads on his ranch, but rather 2000 animals. The *head* he cites represents the whole animal!

The same thing is true about Biblical literature. We can see a part representing the whole of something. For example:

Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them (Acts 2:41).

Here, Luke is using the part (souls) to represent the whole (people). No one would ever read Luke’s writing and think that he was literally saying that only the souls of the people who were baptized were added to the group, and the rest of their bodies were not affected! We understand that he was using this literary device to identify that the whole person was added to the church. Another example:

Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, who risked their own necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles (Romans 16:3–4).

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

Here, Paul was using *neck* as representing the lives of Aquila and Priscilla. They had not literally only risked their neck, failing to endanger any other part of themselves. They had endangered their lives by helping Paul, and he made that clear by using synecdoche.

Idiom. An idiom is defined as: an expression in the usage of a language that is peculiar to itself either grammatically (as no, it wasn't me) or in having a meaning that cannot be derived from the conjoined meanings of its elements (as Monday week for "the Monday a week after next Monday").¹⁰ An idiom is typically drawn from a particular culture or time, and means something specific to that culture or time. The words themselves would not indicate the actual meaning of the phrase used. For example, the southern phrase, "Bless your heart" has a distinct meaning in the southern culture that would not necessarily be understood in other cultures. Certainly, it is not a phrase that is supposed to be taken literally.

We find idioms used in the scriptures as well. One example is found in Peter's first epistle:

Therefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ... (1 Peter 1:13).

Here, "gird up the loins of your mind" is an idiom drawn from the culture of Peter's day. A man would wear long robes, which would get in the way of running if he had to hurry somewhere. So, he would be required to tie the robes up around his waist to free up his legs to hurry. This idea of "girding the loins" came to mean that a man was preparing for some activity. He was preparing himself to be able to move quickly to some task. So then, "gird up the loins of your mind" was an idiom that Peter used to convey the need to prepare the mind for activity ahead that he was warning of.

Unfortunately, some of the modern translations have made the decision to translate the idea of some idioms, such as the one in our example above, rather than to simply translate the words. This sets a dangerous precedent, as they first have to make a decision about what the idiom means, and then insert that into the text rather than simply translating what the author wrote.

Idioms can be difficult, as we must first have an understanding about culture that the idiom came from before we can understand its message. But, there are plenty of reliable sources to help us understand the settings that these idioms came from, so that we can indeed understand the message just as the original author intended for his audience.

Hyperbole. Hyperbole is defined as: extravagant exaggeration (as "mile-high ice-cream cones").¹¹ This is a literary device that overstates something to the extreme for emphasis. The literal meaning of the words is not to be taken, but recognized as being an over-exaggeration. For example, a parent might say to a child, "If I've told you once, I've told you a million times, pick up your toys!" Most likely, that parent has not literally told the child to pick up his toys "a million times," but rather is expressing the idea that they have repeated themselves a lot.

There are examples of hyperbole in scripture as well. Consider Jesus' teaching:

"If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple. (Luke 14:26).

Clearly Jesus was not teaching that every single person must come to hate their physical family, or else they cannot be His disciple. This was an exaggeration to emphasize the need to love and serve Him, even more than one would love his physical family.

Another example from scripture:

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

Blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel! (Matthew 23:24)

In this teaching Jesus was exaggerating the approach of the Pharisees, who were diligent about things like tithing from the smallest plants, but then overlooked the more important matters of the law (justice, mercy and faith). They clearly were not literally swallowing camels! Yet, the hyperbole used by Jesus made it clear that they were getting the small stuff right (straining the gnat) while missing the big stuff (swallowing a camel).

Chiasmus. A chiasmus is an inverted relationship between the syntactic elements of parallel phrases.¹² In a chiasmic phrase, there are two elements which are parallel but inverted. Because of the inverted parallelism, the two elements of the phrase contrast with one another. Here are a couple of examples:

*“Home is where the great are small,
and the small are great.”
~Anonymous*

*“Direct your efforts more to preparing the youth for the path,
and less to preparing the path for the youth.”
~Ben Lindsey*

As you can see, the second line of these quotes invert the ideas of the first line to set a contrast, establishing the main point that the author intends. The same type of format is used in scripture as well. Consider God’s message through Isaiah:

“Make the heart of this people dull, And their ears heavy, And shut their eyes; Lest they see with their eyes, And hear with their ears, And understand with their heart, And return and be healed” (Isaiah 6:10).

Notice that in the first part of the parallel, God lists the heart, the ears and the eyes. In the contrasting section, He inverted the order, speaking of the eyes, the ears and then the heart. In so doing, He clearly emphasized that the changing of the heart is what He desired, and that the people were going to be stubborn and refuse to open their eyes and ears so that they might be willing to change their hearts!

Jesus also used chiasmus in His teaching. Here is one example:

But many who are first will be last, and the last first (Matthew 19:30).

These phrases are often parallel to one another with only an inversion of one section. In this example, Jesus only inverted two words, rather than whole phrases as we have seen in the previous examples.

Apostrophe. Apostrophe is the addressing of a usually absent person or a usually personified thing rhetorically (Carlyle’s “O Liberty, what things are done in thy name!” is an example of apostrophe).¹³ Typically, when using apostrophe, the author is personifying an abstract idea, and addressing it, though it is clear that there can be no response. The following lines from a nursery rhyme illustrate the use of apostrophe:

*Twinkle, twinkle, little star,
How I wonder what you are!*

This literary device is used quite frequently in scripture as well. One way in which this is used is

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

when a speaker addresses his own soul:

Why are you cast down, O my soul? And why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him For the help of His countenance (Psalm 42:5).

In other examples, non-sentient beings are personified and called upon to act in a manner that is completely impossible for them.

Sing, O heavens, for the LORD has done it! Shout, you lower parts of the earth; Break forth into singing, you mountains, O forest, and every tree in it! For the LORD has redeemed Jacob, And glorified Himself in Israel (Isaiah 44:23).

Sing, O heavens! Be joyful, O earth! And break out in singing, O mountains! For the LORD has comforted His people, And will have mercy on His afflicted (Isaiah 49:13).

Let heaven and earth praise Him, The seas and everything that moves in them (Psalm 69:34).

In each of these examples, the inanimate objects are called upon to praise the Lord. They are not literally capable of doing this, but the author is using this literary device to emphasize the need for all the creation to praise the Lord.

Merism. A merism is similar to synecdoche, but instead of being one part represents the whole of something, a combination of parts reflects the whole. For example, we often use the phrase “lock, stock and barrel” to represent the whole of something. There is a combining of parts to show the whole.

This is used in the creation account, where the phrase “an evening and a morning were the first day” was used (Genesis 1:5). The two parts of the day are put together to represent the whole, and completed day.

Another example is found in the psalm:

You shall not be afraid of the terror by night, Nor of the arrow that flies by day, Nor of the pestilence that walks in darkness, Nor of the destruction that lays waste at noonday (Psalm 91:5–6).

By combining night, day, darkness and noonday, the psalmist conveys the idea that there would never be a time that he would be afraid. He could have confidence in God at all time, and so he did not need to worry! He combined the parts of the day to emphasized the whole.

Paradox. A paradox is a statement that is seemingly contradictory or opposed to common sense and yet is perhaps true.¹⁴ When reading a paradox, the statement may seem to not make sense on the surface, but conveys a truth. In literature, paradox is often used to convey a major theme in the work, a main point. For example, in George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, he wrote, “All animals are equal, but some are more equal than others.” Clearly this presents a contradiction, but it also reveals the main theme of that work.

In scripture, there are many statements that can be identified as paradoxes. From Isaiah:

“Hear, you deaf; And look, you blind, that you may see (Isaiah 42:18).

One who is deaf cannot hear, and one who is blind cannot see. Yet, this paradox is used to call to those who needed to see and hear the word of God, seeking for them to make a change.

Another example, from Jesus’ teaching:

For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel’s

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

will save it (Mark 8:35).

This, on the surface, appears to be a contradictory statement. Want to save your life? You will then lose it! But, if you are willing to sacrifice your life, then you will preserve it. When one understands that Jesus was speaking of the spiritual life being impacted by the actions in the physical life, the paradox makes sense, and conveys an eternal, spiritual truth. If you want to preserve your spiritual life, then you cannot emphasize the preservation of the physical!

Irony. Irony is the use of words to express something other than and especially the opposite of the literal meaning.¹⁵ When irony is being used, the meaning of the phrase will actually be the opposite of the actual words being used. This is often conveyed in sarcasm. There are a couple of good examples of this in scripture which we can consider.

Then Job answered and said: "No doubt you are the people, And wisdom will die with you! (Job 12:1–2)

In the midst of this speech, Job was not really praising his friends for their wisdom, but rather was being sarcastic and pointing out that though they thought themselves wise, they did not really have the answers they believed they had! Paul, when addressing the Corinthians used a very similar tactic:

You are already full! You are already rich! You have reigned as kings without us—and indeed I could wish you did reign, that we also might reign with you! For I think that God has displayed us, the apostles, last, as men condemned to death; for we have been made a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men. We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are distinguished, but we are dishonored! (1 Corinthians 4:8–10)

Paul's address shows that the Corinthians had become puffed up in themselves. They clearly were not really the wise, and the strong, especially compared to the apostles! However, Paul was able to use this literary device to drive home his point. His sarcasm made the point that they needed to listen to him, and the other apostles, and not think of themselves as being spiritually superior and not in need of their instruction!

Symbolism. Symbolism is the art or practice of using symbols especially by investing things with a symbolic meaning or by expressing the invisible or intangible by means of visible or sensuous representations.¹⁶ The use of symbols is a clear indicator that the author does not intend for his words to be taken literally. The symbol used stands in place of the actual element that the author is considering. Symbolism is often used to veil the meaning of the author, and can only be understood if there is a key to unlock that meaning.

And four great beasts came up from the sea, each different from the other. (Daniel 7:3)

'Those great beasts, which are four, are four kings which arise out of the earth. (Daniel 7:17)

Here, Daniel provided the symbolism of the beasts, but then also gave a key to understanding that symbolism by defining the beasts as the four kings would come. John, in the book of Revelation, uses similar symbolism, and provides a similar key to understanding:

"Here is the mind which has wisdom: The seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman sits. There are also seven kings. Five have fallen, one is, and the other has not yet come. And when he comes, he must continue a short time. (Revelation 17:9–10)

By looking at the description for the symbols used, one can come to a better understanding of the

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

cryptic language being used by both of these authors. It is evident that neither were talking about literal elements. Daniel was not contemplating a literal beast, and John was not envisioning literal beasts with 7 heads. They described what their symbols meant!

Literary Devices in the Original Languages...

There are some literary devices that are only evident in the original languages. This is one area that we lose the beauty and creativity of the writing (though not the meaning) when we have to translate to a different language. We do not see the elements as a reader of the original would have seen it. Below are a few examples:

Acrostic. An acrostic is a composition usually in verse in which sets of letters (as the initial or final letters of the lines) taken in order form a word or phrase or a regular sequence of letters of the alphabet.¹⁷ The best example of this is found in Psalm 119, where each stanza of 8 verses begins with the same Hebrew letter, and progresses through the whole Hebrew alphabet with each letter. We do not see the repetition of these letters in the English, so we lose the creativity of the author in working through the alphabet with each succeeding stanza.

There are other passages that employ the use of acrostics as well:

In the common form of acrostic found in Old Testament Poetry, each line or stanza begins with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet in order. This literary form may have been intended as an aid to memory, but more likely it was a poetic way of saying that a total coverage of the subject was being offered -- as we would say, 'from A to Z.' Acrostics occur in Psalms 111 and 112, where each letter begins a line; in Psalms 25, 34, and 145, where each letter begins a half-verse; in Psalm 37, Proverbs 31:10-31, and Lamentations 1, 2, and 4, where each letter begins a whole verse; and in Lamentations 3, where each letter begins three verses. Psalm 119 is the most elaborate demonstration of the acrostic method where, in each section of eight verses, the same opening letter is used, and the twenty-two sections of the psalm move through the Hebrew alphabet, letter after letter.¹⁸

In many of these examples, we may be surprised to learn that an acrostic is being employed. There is certainly no hint of it being present in the English.

Alliteration. Alliteration is the repetition of usually initial consonant sounds in two or more neighboring words or syllables (as wild and woolly, threatening throngs).¹⁹ Because the repeated sounds are found only in the original languages, we again are unable to appreciate the creativity of the authors in using this device.

*sha'alu shalom yerushalayim
yishlayu ohavayik
yehi shalom bechelek
shalvah be'armenotayik²⁰*

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: "May they prosper who love you. Peace be within your walls, Prosperity within your palaces." (Psalm 122:6-7)

When written out in the original Hebrew, we can see the repetition of certain sounds which enhance the poetic form. We cannot see the same alliteration in the English translation. We can imagine though, how powerful such a device could be to one reading this in the original language, and understand how beautiful the language was to develop and use this device so effectively!

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ J.A. Motyer, "Acrostic," in *The New International Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), p. 12.

¹⁹ Merriam-Webster, Inc. *Merriam-Webster's collegiate dictionary*. 2003 : n. pag. Print.

²⁰ <http://www.westminster.edu/staff/nak/courses/BibPoetry.htm>

Assonance. Assonance is the resemblance of sound in words or syllables, or a relatively close juxtaposition of similar sounds especially of vowels.²¹ An example of assonance is:

Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers.

Here the author repeats the short “e” sound, as well as the short “i” sound.

Like with the above example of alliteration, assonance in the biblical text is not evident when translated into a different language. When the translation is made, the sounds are clearly not the same, so we lose the creativity of that literary device.

Conclusion...

It is important for us to understand these literary devices and their uses in literature in general, and in the Bible text especially. When we see these devices in use, it tells us that the author did not intend for his words to be taken literally, but rather that he was conveying ideas in a more creative way. These devices are used heavily throughout the poetic writings of scripture, but are certainly not limited to those passages (as has been made evident by many of the examples used throughout this part of our study.)

When we are studying God’s word, we need to be mindful of the different types of devices, and what they convey to us. To consider these examples of symbolic language to be literal would lead us to many faulty conclusions. If we see symbolic language used, we must try and decipher what message the author intended us to grasp from it! While this can be challenging, it is in no way impossible. It is a part of our effort to understand all that God has revealed for us!

²¹ Merriam-Webster, Inc. Merriam-Webster’s collegiate dictionary. 2003 : n. pag. Print.

Questions...

1. What is the difference between literal and figurative language in the scriptures?
2. What types of literary devices are used in scripture?
3. Is the interpretation of the various literary devices in scripture different than other forms of literature? Why or why not?
4. When an author uses symbolism (like John did in the book of Revelation), what happens if one tries to interpret his writings literally?
5. What literary devices of scripture are only evident in the original languages?
6. Why are these devices particularly challenging?
7. What is lost, and what is not lost when these literary devices are translated over into a different language, such as English?

Under the Covenant...

As we have established in previous lessons, we view the scripture according to the claims that it makes for itself. It is the word of God. It is intended for all people of all times. There are applications that God intends for us to make to our lives. The scriptures are not given to be merely theoretical, to be used for a solely intellectual endeavor. However, we also must understand that the scriptures were not produced and delivered in a vacuum. They were written to real people, in a real time. There is an historical setting to each passage that may have a significant impact on our application in the present. We often are faced with the question: "What applies to me?" With this lesson, we want to begin to answer that question by looking at the way that God has interacted with His people since the beginning of time. This will show that there is a particular way in which God interacts with His people at any given time, and that He has a way of showing what His expectations are.

Covenants...

From the very beginning of time, God has formed covenants with mankind. Throughout scripture we are able to either see the covenant itself, or we see the results of the covenant. A covenant is:

1 a disposition, arrangement, of any sort, which one wishes to be valid, the last disposition which one makes of his earthly possessions after his death, a testament or will. 2 a compact, a covenant, a testament. 2A God's covenant with Noah, etc.¹

We understand the nature of a covenant between men. Each party agrees to certain terms, and are expected to keep their agreement. If one chooses to break the covenant that they have made, the other is released from the terms. We have several kinds of covenants which exist in our society, which are often reflected in contracts. Marriage is a covenant. Many jobs operate on a covenant. Even major purchases are often conducted under a covenant.

God has operated under covenants from the time of the creation. The pattern of His covenants are quite similar across time. In fact, there are many elements that are very similar, and familiar, across all the covenants that God has made with various groups. However, as D.R. Dugan stated in his book, *Hermeneutics*:

"Each covenant that God has made with men may have many things in common with all the others, and yet be distinct. There is nothing more common than to mistake similarity for identity. Several things are the same in both, and therefore it is concluded that they are identical, except that the one is more complete in some particulars than the other."²

We will note several similarities in these covenants, but as we do so we must recognize that just because they are similar does not mean they are the same! We will see why this is such an important point later in our study.

Each of these covenants include both God's part in the agreement and man's part. In each covenant, God gives His instructions (the expectations or commands that He has for the people), and what He will provide to those who are obedient. The people, for their part, are expected to be obedient. If they choose to obey, they will receive the blessings that are the fulfillment of God's

¹ Strong, James. *Enhanced Strong's Lexicon 1995* : n. pag. Print.

² Dungan, D.R. *Hermeneutics, A Text Book (Gospel Light Publishing Company, Delight, Arkansas)* p. 108

promises. We do need to note that there have always been consequences for rejecting the covenant that God has provided. This is one area that God's covenants differ from those between men. In many types of covenant, if an individual does not like the terms that are offered, he can simply choose to not enter the covenant. This can be illustrated in a covenant offered for the purchase of a house. If the price is not acceptable, or if there are issues with the house that cannot be resolved, then the purchase agreement (or covenant) would simply be rejected and both parties would walk away from it. There is nothing that obligates the individual from entering a covenant that he does not like.

God's covenant with men would be more akin to the law, or covenant of the land. Simply by being born in the United States, one is amenable to its laws. One cannot simply decide that they are not interested in following the law concerning murder, for example, and thus walk away from the covenant without entering it. One who murders will be held accountable to law, whether they like it, or agree with it. There are consequences for failing to conform to the societal covenant. To break the law, or the covenant, leads to punishment imposed by the society that originates the covenant. One can choose not to conform to the covenant, but that does not free him from the consequences of that covenant. The same is true for God's covenants. While men have the free will to choose to reject the covenant, or disobey God's law, they cannot escape the consequences of rejecting the covenant. When one is disobedient to the law that God has revealed, they will suffer the consequences of their choice.

One last point to consider before we examine the various covenants that have been delivered by God: a covenant is only applicable to the person or people to whom it is extended. This is easily understood when we consider the law of particular nations. We, in the United States, for example, are not bound under the laws of Iran, Russia, or any other nation. We are subject to the laws that have been conferred on us by the nation that we live in, the United States. If a person were to travel to one of these nations, then they would be subject to the laws of that land, whether they approve of, or like those laws. When a law changes, one is not responsible for following the older law. One is only subject to the law or covenant that is currently in place over him.

Likewise, when we examine these various covenants that were delivered by God, we will see that they were only applicable to those people to whom they were given. This is important because it speaks to God's expectations. When He gave a covenant, He expected the people who received that covenant to be obedient to its instructions. When a covenant changed, the people who received the newer covenant were not held accountable to the one given before it. Even when the terms were very similar, their obligation was not to the previous covenant. As we look at these transitions, it is extremely important to see that the obligation of the people is only to the covenant they were currently under--not the previous one, and certainly not the next one!

Now, let's consider the various covenants that are present in scripture. Notice that God does not specify in every one of these that He was making a covenant, and yet we see the elements of the covenant present.

The covenant made with Adam. At the time of creation, God made His first covenant with man. He gave Adam very specific instructions, and with those instructions came a promise of what God would provide for him. In Genesis 1:28-29, God told Adam what He had, and would provide for him. In return, He gave dominion to the man, which came with responsibility. He gave dominion over the animals, and He gave all of the plants for food. God also gave Adam and Eve the responsibility to "be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it..."

Along with these instructions, God declared that Adam and Eve could eat of every tree in the gar-

den, except for one: the tree of knowledge of good and evil (See Genesis 2:16-17). As the giver of the covenant, God had the right to provide instructions of what was allowed, and what was not allowed. Adam and Eve were not in a position to decide whether they would enter the covenant or not. They were under the law, their only choice was whether they would obey or not! The consequence for the disobedience of Adam and Eve was that they were separated from God, cast out of the beautiful garden that He had provided for them. Instead of God providing everything that they needed and wanted, Adam and Eve were cursed, forced to toil over the ground to produce food, and thorns and thistles would impede their work (Genesis 3:17-19). For Eve, God placed her in submission to her husband, and said that her pain in childbearing would be increased. God took away blessings that were contingent on obedience, and imposed punishment for the disobedience! These are key components of the covenants that God made for all men!

Second covenant with Adam and Eve. The second covenant that God made with Adam and Eve was reliant less on what they would do, than what they had already done. Their actions destroyed the relationship that they had with God, and set into motion the process by which God would restore man to Himself. God sent Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden, bearing the consequences of their sin. The consequences of their sin would be the new reality for all mankind. They would bear the challenges imposed upon these two who were guilty for the rest of time. However, in the midst of handing down these consequences, God also provided a message of hope. Consider:

So the LORD God said to the serpent: "Because you have done this, You are cursed more than all cattle, And more than every beast of the field; On your belly you shall go, And you shall eat dust All the days of your life. And I will put enmity Between you and the woman, And between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, And you shall bruise His heel" (Genesis 3:14-15).

This is the first Messianic prophecy, declaring the coming of the one who would defeat Satan, and the evil that he carried with him. This is a part of God's promise concerning the state of mankind. They would not be forever entrapped by the deceitfulness of Satan. God had a plan for redemption, and it would be implemented because of the sin that Adam and Eve brought into the world (See Romans 5:12-21; 1 Peter 1:17-21). God's covenant was that He would send one who would defeat Satan. Until that time, man would have to struggle with sin and its consequences. Through this prophecy, we have a foreshadowing of the last, and greatest covenant that God would make with mankind.

God gave instructions for how man was to serve and worship Him under this covenant. It is under the giving of the second covenant with Adam that we find the children of Adam offering sacrifices to God (Genesis 4:3-5). The Hebrew writer said that Able made his offering "by faith", which means that he offered it according to what God had declared to him (See Romans 10:17). This shows that God continued to have expectations for those that were His people. We are not given all the details of the instructions that were given to Adam and Eve, but we do know that God responded favorably to Able when he was obedient, and unfavorably to Cain because he was disobedient (See Genesis 4:7). As with all covenants with God, those who were obedient received His blessing, while those who were disobedient received His judgment.

God's first covenant with Noah. In God's first instruction to Noah, we find elements of a more traditional covenant, and God even identifies the agreement as such a covenant (Genesis 6:18). Noah was chosen by God because he acted righteously (Genesis 6:7-9). When all the rest of the earth had departed from following the will of God, Noah remained faithful. The judgment that the rest of the world was wicked is an indication that they had failed to keep the covenant that God had given to Adam and Eve! It seems logical that such would have been the law, or responsibility of the people of all the world at the time of Noah. Because of their failure, God determined that He would

destroy the whole world with a flood. But, because of his righteousness, God determined to spare Noah and his family. However, even his salvation was contingent on abiding by a covenant that God would make with him.

God's covenant was that if Noah would do what he was instructed to do, then he would be saved from the coming destruction. God gave Noah very specific instructions for the construction of an ark, in which He would save Noah's family as well as animals of the creation (See Genesis 6:13-22). God's covenant was that if Noah would obey, then he, his family and the animals collected would be spared from the destruction of the flood. One wonders what would have happened if Noah had failed to be obedient, and broken the covenant with God? As God's punishment on the whole world was the result of their disobedience, one would have to assume that Noah would be likewise punished if he failed to obey God's specific instructions! We cannot know what God might have done after the flood if there were no human survivors, but it is clear that Noah's salvation was contingent upon his obedience to the instructions of the Lord.

Notice that this covenant was very specifically made with Noah and his family. God was providing the opportunity of salvation to only this select group of people, and the requirements placed on them for their salvation was limited to them. We would never turn to Genesis 6, and come away with the supposition that we are to build a giant ark as a prerequisite to our salvation! However, we can learn a valuable lesson. When God gives instructions, He intends for them to be strictly kept. So, though we are not given the instruction to build an ark (that was a part of Noah's covenant, not ours), we can learn that we are expected by God to be obedient to the instructions that He has given to us!

God's second covenant with Noah. After coming out of the ark, God formed another covenant with Noah, which He declared to be true for all mankind, as well as the rest of all creation. In this covenant, God declared that He would never again destroy the world with a flood (Genesis 9:8-17). God created the rainbow to be a reminder of this covenant that He made with all flesh. Noah's part of the covenant was expressed in his worship and service before God (Genesis 8:20-22). It appears that it is Noah's continued faithfulness throughout this entire process that brings God to make this covenant with Him. It is interesting to note that though Noah's righteousness played a part in God's decision to instill the covenant, his continued righteousness was not a requirement for God to maintain the covenant. Because of this, this particular covenant stands out as different from some of the other covenants we will consider.

God also provided instructions for how He intended men to behave (Genesis 9:1-7). Notice that God did not make the covenant concerning the destruction of the world by flood contingent on man's obedience. He would impose other consequences on those who would be disobedient to His instructions moving forward. In fact, in Genesis 10, we see such a departure from God's instructions that He chose to confuse the languages of men so that they would be distributed across the world (as He had intended from the beginning). He did not, however, revoke His part of the covenant because of their disobedience. He made that an everlasting covenant which would never be contingent on the actions of mankind. The covenant was not made only with humans, but with "all flesh." For the sake of the creatures who could not submit (in a cognizant manner) to the instructions of God, He declared that He would never destroy the earth in this manner again!

The Messianic covenant with Abram. The first covenant that God made with Abram is found in Genesis 12:1-3. God spoke to Abram and told him that he needed to leave his home land, and travel to a land that would be shown to him. In his obedience, God declared that he would make of him a great nation. The end result would be that "all the families of the earth shall be blessed." This is the promise of the coming Messiah through the lineage of Abram. Of course, it would be impossible to

separate the promise of making Abram a great nation, and the blessing of the all nations through his lineage, as the Messiah would come through the nation that sprang from Abram. This covenant, as with the others that were made with Abram, would be repeated several times throughout the Old Testament history. Many of these covenants would be repeated to Isaac, Jacob and Joseph.

The Land Covenant with Abram. This covenant can first be found in Genesis 12:7. It would be more clearly outlined for Abram just a short time later (Genesis 13:14-17). At a time when Abram may have felt like he was losing the best of the land (because he had given Lot first choice), God made it clear that He was going to give Abram far more, and better land than what Lot had received. It was also during the expounding of this covenant that God promised to also make Abram a great nation. He would make the people of Abram as numerous as the sands of the seashore!

This covenant would eventually be sealed by blood. In Genesis 15:7-21 Moses recorded the interaction between Abraham and God. On that occasion, Abraham asked for a confirmation that he would receive the land that had been promised to him. In response, God instructed Abraham to bring a three year old heifer, a three year old female goat, a three year old ram, a turtledove and a young pigeon, which he would split down the middle (except for the birds) and lay each side opposite the other. In this was the shedding of blood! Later, as a confirmation of the covenant, Abraham saw “a smoking oven and a burning torch that passed between those pieces.” This was the representation of Jehovah, passing through the pieces to confirm the covenant that was made. Abraham was now bound with God in the covenant. He was to be obedient, and God would provide the blessings!

It is interesting to see the connection between God’s fulfillment of the covenant and the obedience of Abram and his children after him. For example, Isaac had the promise repeated to him, but God told him that He would provide the blessing of this covenant (the land) because of the faithfulness and obedience of his father Abraham (Genesis 26:1-5). However, as time would pass, the keeping of the land would be contingent upon the obedience of the nation (the descendants of Abraham). Later, they would lose the land, and be taken into the Assyrian captivity, and then (for the southern tribes, the nation of Judah) the Babylonian captivity. This was a direct result of their violation of the rules of God’s covenant. They would not be permitted to keep the land if they refused to be obedient to God. Because of their idolatry (among other sinful practices) they had the land taken away, with only a small remnant allowed to return to possess the land following the captivity. They would never regain the land to the same extent that they had before their punishing captivities.

God’s Covenant of Circumcision with Abram. God instituted the covenant of circumcision with Abraham (notice his name change from “Abram” to “Abraham” in Genesis 17:5). Abraham was told that circumcision would be the sign of the covenant that God had made with him, and that it would be a perpetual sign for him and his descendants after him (Genesis 17:9-14). This should have served as a reminder of their responsibility to remain faithful to the Lord. They had the sign of the covenant in their flesh! It was in this manner that God separated out one particular people from all the rest. Through this act, God began the process of making Abraham and his descendants different than the people around them.

It is clear that God instituted this covenant of circumcision as its own action. However, it cannot be completely separated from the other covenants that God made with Abraham, those concerning being given a great land and having all the nations of the earth blessed through his seed. But, as D. R. Dungan stated:

“...while these covenants have just this much relation to each other, it is entirely improper to speak of them as but one covenant. All the contracts which God has made with the different portions of the race have had some reference to this great salvation in Christ; but that fact does not make them one

and the same covenant.”¹³

Each of these promises or covenants was based upon obedience. Either it was based on Abraham’s own obedience (the right of his descendants to gain the land that he was promised); or it was based on the obedience of the people after him (the right to keep the land). God would keep His promises! He would be faithful to the covenant that He made.

God’s Covenant with the Nation of Israel at Mount Sinai. This next covenant strays from pattern of the previous ones because in it God made a covenant with the nation of Israel, rather than only with an individual. With this covenant, God conferred the blessings and promises that He had made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to the people of Israel. He was, in fact, extending the covenants that had been previously made to the whole of the people who were the descendants of Abraham (the fulfillment of the “great nation” promise). God specified these principles to Moses as He provided the covenant to the people:

I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as God Almighty, but by My name LORD I was not known to them. I have also established My covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan, the land of their pilgrimage, in which they were strangers. And I have also heard the groaning of the children of Israel whom the Egyptians keep in bondage, and I have remembered My covenant. Therefore say to the children of Israel: ‘I am the LORD; I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, I will rescue you from their bondage, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments. I will take you as My people, and I will be your God. Then you shall know that I am the LORD your God who brings you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. And I will bring you into the land which I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; and I will give it to you as a heritage: I am the LORD.’ ” (Exodus 6:3–8)

Some have mistakenly supposed that God was telling Moses that He had never formed a covenant with anyone before under His memorial name of Jehovah. Most likely, what is translated as a statement to Moses is supposed to really be a question. He was not stating that He had never been known as Jehovah to those that had come before and with whom He had forged covenants. In fact, it is in Genesis 15:7 that we see God identifying Himself as Jehovah to Abraham when He confirmed the land and great nation covenants with him. The Hebrew writer said this concerning the covenant with Abraham:

For when God made a promise to Abraham, because He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself, saying, “Surely blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply you.” And so, after he had patiently endured, he obtained the promise. For men indeed swear by the greater, and an oath for confirmation is for them an end of all dispute. Thus God, determining to show more abundantly to the heirs of promise the immutability of His counsel, confirmed it by an oath, that by two immutable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we might have strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before us. (Hebrews 6:13–18)

This is a reference back to God’s confirmation of these same covenants in Genesis 22 (when Abraham took Isaac to offer him on the mountain):

Then the Angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time out of heaven, and said: “By Myself I have sworn, says the LORD, because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son—blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies. In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice.” (Genesis 22:15–18)

In these interactions with Abraham, God identified Himself as Jehovah, the very memorial name He

3 Dungan, D.R. *Hermeneutics, A Text Book* (Gospel Light Publishing Company, Delight, Arkansas) p. 118

used when addressing Moses at the time He forged the covenant with the children of Israel.

The covenant made at Sinai would be broken by the people and re-established by God on more than one occasion. Probably the most evident example of this was shortly after the covenant was first given. After giving the covenant, God instructed Moses to climb up Mount Sinai so that it could be written on tablets of stone (see Exodus 24:1-18). Moses spent 40 days on the mountain. While coming down from the mountain, with the newly carved tablets of stone containing the covenant (the 10 Commandments), Moses and Joshua heard the celebration of the people in the camp, as they worshiped the golden calf that was made by Aaron (see Exodus 32, especially verse 19). When Moses came near the camp, he threw the tablets with the covenant on them down, and broke them. This was not, as many seem to want to attribute to Moses, a fit of rage. He was angry, but the breaking of the tablets was a sign of the breaking of the covenant. The people had sworn to keep the covenant of the Lord, and yet, they had chosen to break it. After the consequences imposed on them by God, there was a need for Him to re-offer the covenant to the people. Once again, Moses had to return to the mountain so that the stone tablets could be re-done. Moses spent another 40 days, during which God gave him further instructions, and told him to write down all that he had been commanded (Exodus 34:27). God wrote the 10 commandments on stone once again, and gave them to Moses (Exodus 34:28). This illustrates the way in which God showed mercy to His people. They could have simply been destroyed (as God often threatened to do to them) because they had violated their part of the covenant. Punishment was justified, or deserved. But, God did not destroy them. Instead, He chose to provide another opportunity for them. This pattern would be repeated multiple times, with the offer of the covenant extended again and again to the people of Israel. Each time God chooses to not destroy the people completely, He was extending mercy to the people, and re-establishing the tenants of this particular covenant. Even in extreme cases, as in the time of the rebellion, where the people refused to move into the promised land and possess it, as He had prepared it for them, God still showed mercy. In that particular instance, one generation was not permitted to enter the land, but God made provisions for the next generation to take possession of it. It was with that second generation that God established His covenant once more, fulfilling His land promise made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob!

This would be the last of the covenants made with the Israelites. As stated above, it would be renewed with them from time to time, ranging from Moses' day up to the time of the return of the captives from the Babylonian captivity. But, then there would be a period of silence, in which God did not speak to His people for a period of about 400 years. At the end of that period, God would bring about a completely new covenant with mankind, that would be drastically different than any covenant He had previously had with them.

Many of the prophets spoke of the coming of a covenant. Jeremiah probably addressed this transition more clearly than any of the other prophets:

“Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah—not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more” (Jeremiah 31:31–34).

Jeremiah makes it clear that this new covenant would not be “according to the covenant” that had

been earlier delivered. Recognizing this period of transition is crucial to realizing what God expects of us today. Once the transition was complete, there would be no further obligation to following a defunct covenant.

God's Covenant Through Christ. God's last covenant formed with mankind would be the one that He instituted through His son. This covenant was the ultimate fulfillment of the covenant that He had made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It was through this Son that all nations of the earth would be blessed. Jesus Himself made it clear that when He came, He fulfilled the Law and Prophets:

"Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled (Matthew 5:17-18).

He was the only person to ever perfectly keep the covenant that God had given to man! He never violated anything that God required under it. Fulfilling the covenant, rather than breaking it, put Him into a position to usher in a new covenant with mankind. The Hebrew writer addressed this transition process in some detail. He described how this covenant is so much better than anything that had come before it. In fact, the Hebrew writer points out that God intended for the first covenant (the Law of Moses) to be flawed. If it had been perfect, there would have never been a need for another covenant, and all of the promises made to Abraham would be for naught (Hebrews 8:6-13).

The author of Hebrews made an extensive argument concerning the superiority of this new covenant that was mediated by Jesus. In many respects, it is shown to be far greater. In chapter 9, the Hebrew writer begins to establish the reasons this covenant is so much better. He started by showing that the Old Covenant was centered on the tabernacle (later the temple) and the worship that took place there. That house of God was nothing short of spectacular, and yet men were very limited in their access to God! Hebrews 9:1-10 briefly describes the worship that would take place at the tabernacle, but it also identifies one shortfall of that worship:

But into the second part the high priest went alone once a year, not without blood, which he offered for himself and for the people's sins committed in ignorance; the Holy Spirit indicating this, that the way into the Holiest of All was not yet made manifest while the first tabernacle was still standing (Hebrews 9:7-8).

There was an important access to God that was simply unattainable under the Old Testament covenant. Only the High Priest could go into the Most Holy Place, and that was only one time per year, with blood (Hebrews 9:7). Jesus, however, through the shedding of His own blood opened up access to the Most Holy Place, providing an access to God that had never existed since before the fall of Adam in the Garden of Eden (see Hebrews 6:13-20). This opening up of the Most Holy Place was symbolized at the death of Jesus by the tearing of the veil in the temple (which separated the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place, Matthew 27:51). Now, access to the Most Holy Place was not limited only to the High Priests, but to all who were faithful to God under the coming, New Covenant. Just having this improved, personal access to God (rather than through another human intermediary, the High Priest) should be enough to show that this New Covenant is both different and better than that which came before it. But, the Hebrew writer did not stop there. He gave several more reasons to believe that the New Covenant is better than the Old.

We have a better High Priest. The High Priests of the Old Covenant were mere men, who were limited by both their sinful practices and the by the fact that they would die. These men could not make intercession for the people without first making an offering for themselves. How could they cleanse the people when they were corrupted themselves? Jesus came to be a new, and different type of High Priest. He is, as the Hebrew writer states, a priest "after the order of Melchizedek." While He-

brews 7 is a difficult section of scripture to understand in its detail, we can clearly see a couple of points that are important to understanding the importance of this transition to the New Covenant. First, Jesus could not be a priest in the Old Testament covenant. He was from the tribe of Judah, and only Levites could be priests under the Law of Moses (Hebrews 7:14). Second, if Jesus was to be the High Priest, then there was, of necessity, a change of the Law. If He could not be made High Priest under that Law (because of the genetic requirements) then the Law itself would have to change (Hebrews 7:12).

This High Priest was not made to be High Priest like those who came before Him. They were made High Priest because of their lineage; they were the sons of Aaron. Jesus, however, was made to be High Priest by an oath; the oath of God Himself (Hebrews 7:21).

Jesus, as High Priest, would also never die. There had been many High Priests that served under the Old Testament covenant. That had to happen because they would die, and need to be replaced (Hebrews 7:23-24). Jesus, on the other hand would live, and serve as High Priest, forever. Because He did not sin, and because He now lives and serves forever, there is no need for Him to continually offer sacrifices (both for Himself and the people) as the High Priests of old had to do (Hebrews 7:27-28). Why would we want to return to covenant that has an inferior priesthood, and an inferior High Priest?

We have better promises. We spent quite a bit of time showing that the covenant made with Abraham was based on several promises: Land, a great nation, all nations would be blessed. The Hebrew writer states that we under this new covenant, have better promises than what God provided under the Old Testament covenant (Hebrews 8:6). Most notably, we have in the New Covenant a promise of the forgiveness of sins, something that was not present under the Old Testament Covenant. Their forgiveness was tied inextricably to the sacrifice of Christ, and the institution of the New Covenant (Hebrews 8:12). Forgiveness was not found in the sacrifice of animals:

For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins. (Hebrews 10:4)

The fulfillment of the promise of God's grace and mercy are only found in the New Testament Covenant. Everything that was written before was pointing to the coming of that Covenant, and all the promises were reliant upon the coming of the New Covenant. Had there never been the sacrifice of Christ, there never would have been forgiveness for those under the previous covenants!

We have better sacrifices. It is impossible to separate this point from the previous one. We have the promise of the forgiveness of sins in the New Covenant, which is a far better promise than anything that came before it. That forgiveness is predicated on the sacrifice of Christ. He is the better sacrifice that has been offered for us; far better than the animal sacrifices of old!

The Hebrew writer addressed the superiority of the sacrifice of Christ more than once. The most detailed contrast of the sacrifices of the Old Testament and that of the New is found in Hebrews 9:1-10:18. In this section, the author points out the shortfall of the Old Testament sacrifices, and how the sacrifice of Jesus has surpassed them greatly. He provides several reasons for the superiority of the sacrifice offered by Christ:

He came through the greater and more perfect tent (Hebrews 9:11). The sacrifices of the Old Testament were centered around worship in the tabernacle. That "tent" was earthly, and only a shadow of the things that were in heaven (See Hebrews 10:23). These were copies of the true holy things in heaven. So, while the High Priests of old came through the earthly tabernacle to offer earthly sacrifices, Christ came through the true holy places, those found in heaven, to offer His greater sacrifice. Jesus came through the true Holy Places, while the priests of old served in the shadow!

The implications of this difference are astounding. Whereas the High Priests could offer sacrifices for the people, they were in the same condition as those people. Jesus, being sinless, could tear down the restrictions placed on imperfect men (they were not allowed, as a general rule, to enter the Most Holy Place). He has gone into the holy places “not made with hands,” into heaven itself! He is able to “appear in the presence of God on our behalf” (Hebrews 9:24). He has, therefore, become a greater intercessor for men than the priests could ever hope to be!

He shed His own blood (Hebrews 9:12). The priests of the Old Testament covenant came shedding the blood of goats and calves for the sins of the people. Jesus did not come to shed the blood of another, but rather to shed His own blood, the perfect sacrifice for sin. He offered that which was His own to give, not volunteering the blood (life) of another.

I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own. As the Father knows Me, even so I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep. And other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice; and there will be one flock and one shepherd. “Therefore My Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This command I have received from My Father” (John 10:14–18).

The Hebrew writer made it clear that this blood was far more valuable than all the blood that had been shed before:

For if the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? And for this reason He is the Mediator of the new covenant, by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant, that those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance (Hebrews 9:13–15).

The best that the priests could do for their brethren was to offer the blood of another. They were imperfect themselves, and so had to offer their own blood would be pointless (Hebrews 9:7). He had to make an offering for his own sins before he could act as an intermediary for the people, and offer sacrifice for them.

He only had to offer Himself one time (Hebrews 9:25). The High Priests of old had to make many sacrifices for both themselves and for the people. They were offering animals at an astounding rate, killing thousands upon thousands of animals every year. But, even in all of that sacrifice, there was no removal of sin. The Hebrew writer said that in those sacrifices there was only a reminder of sin every year (Hebrews 10:3)! He did not have to offer Himself over and over, as the sacrifice of His own blood was sufficient for appeasing the wrath of God for all time. He offered Himself so that sins could be forgiven, rather than remembered (Hebrews 9:26-28). This shows the difference between the imperfect sacrifices of the Old Testament covenant, and the perfect sacrifice of Christ. With one sacrifice, He did away with all that was imperfect, and became the mediator of a better covenant (Hebrews 9:15, 10:14).

His sacrifice took away sins (Hebrews 10:10). As we saw earlier, the sacrifices of the Old Testament covenant could not take away sins. They, in fact, only served as a reminder of sins, year by year (Hebrews 10:3-4). But, His sacrifice served to offer forgiveness of sins to all those who would be obedient to God. This included those who served under previous covenants, as well as all who would serve Him moving forward. It was through this sacrifice that “eternal redemption” was offered to mankind (Hebrews 9:12-15). It was through this one sacrifice that He perfected all who would be sanctified (Hebrews 10:14). Why would anyone want to return to a covenant that could not remove

sins? With this sacrifice, there was true forgiveness of sins. That was a blessing that had never been granted before, under any covenant. The sacrifice of Christ established forgiveness for all who had been obedient to God under every other covenant He had established with mankind. Once true forgiveness was offered, through this one sacrifice, there would never be the need for sin sacrifices again (Hebrews 10:18)! This one perfect sacrifice replaced forever all that was imperfect before it.

We have a better medium and relationship with God (Hebrews 8:8-13). The Old Testament Covenant was written on tablets of stone, and delivered to the people. In that covenant, the people of God were born into His kingdom, and then had the responsibility to learn about Him. Under the New Testament Covenant, there would not be a need to teach those who were in the kingdom to “know the Lord” because they would already know Him! This was at the heart of the prophecy that Jeremiah made (Jeremiah 31:31ff). Instead of having the law written on stone, Jeremiah said the Law of the Lord would be written on the hearts of His people. The end result would be that God would have the relationship with His people that He desired, but never really accomplished under the Old Covenant. Under this New Covenant, it became necessary to have the Law of the Lord written in the heart to become one of His people. Without true conviction in the heart of the instructions of the Lord, one will never enter into this kingdom. You cannot end up in it by either lineage or accident. Why would anyone want to turn again to a covenant that is imperfect in its relationship with God?

Serving Under the Covenant...

After looking at all of these various covenants, the question we must address is: What covenant are we responsible to follow and obey? As we saw earlier in this study, a covenant is only binding on those people that are placed under it, those to whom it is given. As we have progressed, we have shown that each covenant presented by God was limited to those people who received His direction under it. We are not bound by God’s covenant with Noah to build an ark to receive His salvation!

The New Covenant instituted through the blood of Christ is the final covenant established between God and man. This covenant stands apart from all the others because it was instituted to replace all others, and to bring all men into one covenant with God:

Therefore remember that you, once Gentiles in the flesh—who are called Uncircumcision by what is called the Circumcision made in the flesh by hands—that at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity. And He came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near. For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father. Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit (Ephesians 2:11–22).

This is why Jesus, as He was preparing to ascend back to Heaven, was able to tell His disciples:

“All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:18–20).

The responsibility to proclaim the gospel and make disciple of “all nations” is the end result of this covenant being binding on “all nations.” Everyone is now amenable to the covenant of Christ. This is the type of covenant that one does not have to agree to in order to be under! Every person who is able to listen to the gospel and respond is responsible for their own obedience.

This is the last Covenant that God will present to mankind. After this, comes the judgment! He has sent His son to offer salvation. What more could He do? What could be left to offer? All that God presented to mankind throughout time was to bring us to that which was perfect. We have a perfect sacrifice, sealing a perfect covenant. There can be nothing more to look forward to in this life!

As we move forward in our study, we will continue to work from this established premise: there is only one covenant that we are bound under. We are not responsible for keeping any of the previous covenants that God has sent. We are, however, responsible to this last covenant, the one that has been sent for all mankind to follow. As we continue our study, we will spend more time establishing how we understand the instructions of that covenant. We will also spend some time in the next lesson showing how we can learn principles from the covenants that came before, but that we are not bound by the specific precepts of those covenants.

Questions...

1. What is a covenant?
2. List a few of the covenants that God has made with men throughout history.
3. List 4 ways that the New Covenant is better than the covenant made with Moses at Mt. Sinai.
4. Why is it significant that Jesus is a priest “after the order of Melchizedek” rather than after the Levitical Priesthood?
5. How was Jesus’ sacrifice greater than the sacrifices that came before, under other covenants?
6. Which covenant of God are we amenable to today? How do we know this?
7. Must one agree with the covenant of God before he is responsible for being obedient? Why or why not?

For Our Learning...

In the last lesson, we looked at the various covenants that have been given by God to men. We saw, in that lesson, that covenants were applicable to the people to whom they were given. We also saw that God delivered a “new covenant” through His Son, the Messiah, and that this covenant was to be the last covenant for all men, for the remainder of time. This is an important principle, as it tells us what covenant we are responsible for. We are not held accountable to any of the previous covenants that God delivered to various peoples. We are only responsible for the covenant that was delivered for us and for our time.

Some have incorrectly concluded that because we are not accountable to the covenants that have come before, they are of no value to us. Such a supposition would make the revelation of those covenants delivered before pointless. Why would God record the information of those covenants if He did not intend for us to gain some benefit from them? Consider what Paul wrote:

For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope (Romans 15:4).

This instruction tells us that there is value in studying the things that were revealed before the coming of Christ. There are things that we can learn from the covenants that came before, even though we are not under those covenants. There are principles that can be taken away from the things recorded in the Old Testament, and applications that can be made to our way of thinking toward the covenant that we live under. The challenge is figuring out the principles that we can learn and apply, while understanding that the tenants of the covenants themselves are not to be followed.

To help clarify this idea, we’ll consider a couple of the covenants given by God from this perspective.

God’s Covenant With Noah

As we saw in the previous lesson, God made a covenant with Noah that promised salvation from the coming destruction of the world if Noah would be obedient and build the ark as directed. The covenant was two parts: God’s part, and Noah’s part. When we look at the account of Noah and his work in Genesis 6-8, we observe Noah’s obedience. He was given specific instructions on how to build the boat, and his salvation was contingent on his following of those instructions.

When we examine this account, we do not think that we should start to build an ark to facilitate our salvation. We have not been given a message concerning the impending physical destruction of the earth. We have not been given instructions concerning the building of a great ark. Simply put, we have not received either the message of warning nor the instructions of salvation of that covenant. We are not obligated to the side of the covenant conferred upon Noah. It was for him, and for his family.

However, when we look at this account, there are many general principles that we can learn from it. We learn, for example that God expects complete obedience when He gives instructions. God was angry with mankind because they had rejected His instructions, and was to the point that He would

destroy all mankind (save for Noah and his family) from the face of the earth. Noah's salvation required that he be obedient to God's instructions.

We can also learn that salvation provided by God requires men to do work. That is what obedience was for Noah. He had to work diligently to fulfill the instructions that God gave, which included working on an ark that could have taken 100 years or more to build. Even though Noah did everything that God commanded of him (Genesis 6:22), he still did not earn his salvation. No matter how much work Noah did, his salvation would always be the direct result of God showering him with grace and mercy. This illustrates the conditional nature of God's grace and mercy. He has promised to extend these characteristics to men, but only when they are obedient.

We do learn much about the grace and mercy of God through this account. Many focus on the destruction of the world, and claim that God is vengeful and angry. However, His grace and mercy are evident by the fact that He made provision for those who were righteous to have a way of escape from the impending doom. It should also be noted that God's grace and mercy are displayed in the fact that He delayed the destruction of the earth for some 100 years while Noah and his sons were building the ark. During that period of time, Noah continued to preach a message of repentance to the people around him (2 Peter 2:4-5), giving them every opportunity to join with him in salvation. Every person who heard the message proclaimed by Noah had the opportunity to repent. They had God's grace and mercy offered to them, and chose (through their own free will) to reject it.

Another lesson we can learn from the account of Noah is that God fulfills His promises. When God makes a promise, we can trust that He will fulfill those promises. If we were not provided the accounts of fulfilled promises in the Old Testament, we would not know if we could trust God to do what He said He would do or not! We have confidence that God will fulfill the promises that He has made to us because we can read about His untarnished faithfulness in those things that were written before! The Hebrew writer based part of his argument on this idea:

For when God made a promise to Abraham, because He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself, saying, "Surely blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply you." And so, after he had patiently endured, he obtained the promise. For men indeed swear by the greater, and an oath for confirmation is for them an end of all dispute. Thus God, determining to show more abundantly to the heirs of promise the immutability of His counsel, confirmed it by an oath, that by two immutable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we might have strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before us. This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which enters the Presence behind the veil, where the forerunner has entered for us, even Jesus, having become High Priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek (Hebrews 6:13-20).

One of the "immutable things" that the argument is based upon is God's incapability to lie. When He made a promise, that promise would come to pass. This argument is not made simply by conveying the words, but rather on historical confirmation. He was making an appeal to the accounts that had been recorded before (which the Hebrews accepted as true) to show that God made promises, and God fulfilled promises. There were no examples that could be pointed to that showed that God had made a promise and then failed to keep it! We, therefore, learn about the immutable characteristic of God that He cannot lie.

The use of the word "immutable" in this context helps us to see that we can learn about the nature and characteristics of God from these Old Testament passages. The point of using the term "immutable" is that it identifies this characteristic of God as being "unchanging" or "unchangeable." The characteristic that God possessed in the time of Abraham (or even before that, Noah) is the same characteristic that He possesses today.

God's Covenant With Israel

Much like the covenant with Noah, we can look at some of the aspects of the covenant that God made with the people of Israel and see that there are lessons that we can learn, even if we are not living under that covenant. By looking at the instructions that God gave to His people under that covenant, and seeing how He responded to obedience and disobedience under it, we can gain an understanding of God, and His relationship with His people. What we notice is that God has changed the specific actions that He requires under the covenant, but not the expectations for obedience.

There are, for example, many practices that God established as being sinful for the people of Israel. Some, He was clear, were wrong because of their innate sinfulness. That is, they were sinful for the people of Israel, and they were sinful for all other people as well. Some practices God condemned for the people of Israel because they made a specific point for His people. These instructions were not for any other people under any other covenant.

Let's start with an example of the latter first. God gave instructions to the people of Israel that they were not to wear clothes that were made of two different types of fabric together (Deuteronomy 19:19). This instruction was intertwined with instructions to not allow livestock to interbreed, and to not plant more than one kind of seed in a field. There is nothing innately wrong with wearing a shirt made of more than one kind of material; this was an instruction just for the children of Israel. These instructions served a deeper purpose. The intent of these laws was to teach the children of Israel about purity. God had an expectation that they would keep themselves pure, not mingling with the Gentile nations. There was a need for this purity, as the Messiah was to descend through these people, and the lineage was to remain pure. Once the Messiah came, there was no need for the purity of lineage, and all records of such were destroyed with the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.

While we do not have the same instructions concerning these types of separation in the New Testament covenant, we can still learn from what was revealed to Israel. We still need to learn the lesson of moral, and spiritual purity. God has not required that we have this type of physical reminder in our daily lives, but He has certainly provided the principle for us:

Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said: "I will dwell in them And walk among them. I will be their God, And they shall be My people." Therefore "Come out from among them And be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, And I will receive you." "I will be a Father to you, and you shall be My sons and daughters, says the LORD Almighty" (2 Corinthians 6:14–18).

While the children of Israel were given these overt reminders of keeping themselves physically separate from those around them, we have instructions to stay separate from worldly people around us. It is not that we are to be removed from the world, but we must learn how to keep ourselves pure from the world around us:

Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world (James 1:27).

I have given them Your word; and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth (John 17:14–17).

Nowhere in the writings of the New Covenant are there instructions for us to refrain from mixing fabrics, or to refrain from planting two types of seed within the same field. The concepts of remaining pure, however, are prevalent in the New Covenant. The principle remains, even though the specifics of obedience have changed substantially. We learn how seriously God takes the principle from the Old Testament covenant, and we learn what He expects of us under the New Testament covenant.

Now, let's consider an example of God's instructions for the Israelites that was true for all people. God condemned the practice of homosexuality for His people under the Old Covenant:

You shall not lie with a male as with a woman. It is an abomination (Leviticus 18:22).

If a man lies with a male as he lies with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination. They shall surely be put to death. Their blood shall be upon them (Leviticus 20:13).

Some have proposed that these instructions were only true for the Israelites, and that, like instructions for not mixing fabrics, they do not apply to us today. There are a couple of ideas that need our consideration. First, we need to understand that we are not under the instructions of the Old Testament covenant, and therefore are not bound to obey the instructions because they are found there. We are under the New Testament covenant, which repeats the condemnation of this sinful practice:

Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God (1 Corinthians 6:9–11).

Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man—and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things. Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves, who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen. For this reason God gave them up to vile passions. For even their women exchanged the natural use for what is against nature. Likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust for one another, men with men committing what is shameful, and receiving in themselves the penalty of their error which was due. And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting; being filled with all unrighteousness, sexual immorality, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, evil-mindedness; they are whisperers, backbiters, haters of God, violent, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, undiscerning, untrustworthy, unloving, unforgiving, unmerciful; who, knowing the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things are deserving of death, not only do the same but also approve of those who practice them (Romans 1:22–32).

We see throughout scripture that God dealt with the sin of homosexuality harshly. In fact, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah were the direct result of the sin of homosexuality (Genesis 19:1-11). God has condemned this sinful behavior throughout time. We do not reject homosexuality because it is condemned in the Old Testament, but rather because it is condemned in our covenant. We can learn, however, how seriously God took this sin. He called it an abomination. He dealt with it by condemning the guilty to death. We are not given those instructions in the New Covenant, so we do not implement such a penalty. But, that does not change the fact that we can learn how seriously God has viewed such sins in times past. We clearly learn that God intends for His people to avoid sins that He identifies, and learn how He deals with those who refuse to comply!

Learning from the past...

It does not take long when studying the scriptures to see that God revealed and recorded the events of the past for a reason: so that we might be able to learn from the actions and experiences of those that came before us. Throughout the New Testament, the writers refer back to events in the Old Testament to illustrate some point of value. Perhaps, the passage this is most evident is found in Hebrews chapter 11. There, we have a running history of faithful characters from the Old Testament, which reveal some characteristic that we should apply to our own lives. Notice, as we consider this passage, that we are not instructed to be obedient to the specific acts that these men and women of faith were given, but we are supposed to emulate their faith.

The examples of faith set out for us in Hebrews 11 are introduced by an important verse at the end of chapter 10:

But we are not of those who draw back to perdition, but of those who believe to the saving of the soul. (Hebrews 10:39)

The English Standard Version of the Bible translates this verse a little differently:

But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls (Hebrews 10:39).

This latter translation shows the connection between the end of chapter 10 and the beginning of chapter 11 a little better. The author was encouraging his readers to have the same kind of faith that he was about to write about with Old Testament examples. The positive examples of chapter 11 stand in contrast to the negative example of the children of Israel who failed to enter into the promised land (Hebrews 3-4).

Reading Hebrews chapter 11 reveals to us what it means to truly have *faith*. This is an important lesson to learn, as we are bombarded by the idea in the religious world that we are “saved by faith only.” Those who propagate such doctrine do not understand the nature of faith! Declaring we are saved by “faith only” is an attempt to disregard actions (works). However, we can learn from these things that were written before, what God’s expectations are for us. This application is clearly made by the verse cited above (Hebrews 10:39).

Examples of faith...

Hebrews 11 is filled with examples of faith, all of which we should emulate. Let us consider a couple that are expressed by the Hebrew writer.

Abel. The Hebrew writer tells us that Abel, by faith, offered a more excellent sacrifice than Cain. When we speak of something being done “by faith” we must realize that it was done according to the word of God:

So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God (Romans 10:17).

From this, we understand that God gave Abel instructions, and he was counted as faithful because he did what God told him to do. Cain, on the other hand, failed to make his offering according to the instructions of God. His offering was not made “by faith”.

We do not presume that we are to make the same offering as Abel because he is used as an example of faith. In fact, it would be impossible for us to do so, because we have not received the instructions that he was given; we do not know what his offering was exactly! However, we can learn from this instruction that God expects those who are faithful to do just what He commands.

Only those who are obedient can be counted as faithful! The contrast established by the examples of Cain and Abel make this point: The obedient are called faithful, while the disobedient are not. We learn, therefore, the importance of obedience from the example of Abel.

Enoch. In Hebrews 11:5-6, the Hebrew writer used the example of Enoch to illustrate faithfulness. It is interesting to note that he did not identify one specific thing in Enoch's life that illustrated faithfulness, but rather the example of his whole life. He was taken by God, rather than seeing death, because he had "...this testimony, that he pleased God."

Using the life of Enoch, the Hebrew writer was able to make the general application:

But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him (Hebrews 11:6).

Through this application, the Hebrew writer illustrates the very point we are trying to make. We can learn a lesson from these examples of old, even if we are not instructed to do the same things that they were told to do. We don't know all that Enoch was commanded to do, so we cannot emulate his exact actions. What we can emulate is his faithfulness. He was identified as one who "pleased God" because he was obedient. He did what God told him to do. We learn what *faithfulness* means by the example of men like Enoch. We learn, but Paul's application to Enoch's example, that faithfulness is far more than just an intellectual acceptance of the existence of God (or Christ for that matter). It also requires diligently seeking after Him. We must seek out His instructions for our lives, and put them into practice. If we do not, then we are not learning anything from the example of Enoch!

Abraham. The first example of Abraham used by the Hebrew writer is that of God calling him from his homeland to go into another land (Hebrews 11:8-10). Abraham was called out, and he responded, even though he did not know where he was going. Clearly, our lesson from Abraham here is not that we should pack up and move toward Canaan. We have no call to do, and we could not possibly do so without "knowing where <we are> going."

What we can take from the example of Abraham is that God expects obedience, even when that obedience is hard. He expects us to follow His instructions, even when we may not fully understand His instructions. Abraham's choice to do just what God instructed is called *faith*.

Another lesson we learn from this account in Abraham's life is that we need to have the proper attitude. Abraham was able to pull up stakes and move to a new land because he had the proper attitude toward his life in this world. He was looking for something greater. Paul said that he was waiting "for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God." He was not so enthralled by the personal possessions of this life that he could not leave them behind for the instruction of God. Sometimes we become so wrapped up in what we have that we are unwilling to let go. Jesus said:

"Assuredly I say to you, that in the regeneration, when the Son of Man sits on the throne of His glory, you who have followed Me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My name's sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first" (Matthew 19:28-30).

So, we can learn from Abraham that we need to look beyond this life, and realize that there is much more to come than what we can accrue here. In fact, Paul went on to describe the attitude of Abraham and his wife Sarah, and their descendants that followed them:

These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured

of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland. And truly if they had called to mind that country from which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return. But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them (Hebrews 11:13–16).

From these Old Testament characters that lived as pilgrims in the land, we learn to live as spiritual pilgrims today. We look for the eternal land that has been promised to us, and strive to live in such a way as to attain it!

The Hebrew writer also cites the example of Abraham offering up his son, Isaac, as an offering (Hebrews 11:17-19). Clearly, God is not giving instructions that every parent is supposed to take his son and offer him as a burnt offering on a far away mountain. We can learn, however, what it means to have true faith in God. All of the promises made to Abraham were contingent on his son of promise. But, God told him to take that son and offer him as a burnt offering. Abraham, understanding the promises, believed that God would resurrect Isaac if he were put to death. This is faith! There is no evidence that God told him that he would raise Isaac, nor is there any evidence that Abraham had seen such a miracle.

From Abraham's example, we can learn what it means to act in faith. He put all of his trust in God and His promises. He believed that God would do whatever was necessary for those promises to be fulfilled. If His promises were reliant upon the son of promise, then he believed that God would raise him from the dead. We learn the lesson that we must do whatever God requires, even if we don't know how God is going to use it to fulfill His promises. Even if we do not understand all the reasons that God gives a particular instruction, faith demands that we act in obedience. While we are not bound to follow the specific instructions given to Abraham, we can learn about what it means to be obedient in faith. We learn to do just what God commands us to do, without questioning His authority to give the commands!

Moses. The writer of Hebrews introduced Moses at his birth, praising the faith of his parents who hid him from Pharaoh and his wicked edict. Here, we are not to learn that we are to take our children and hide them in the river when they are born. We certainly have no threat that would incite such action. However, we can learn from this account that God views children as precious. When Pharaoh commanded that all the young boys be killed, people of faith knew that God expected more of them. We can also learn from this account that God expects faithful people to defy secular governments when they create laws that would cause one to violate His will. There are certainly applications that we can make to these principles today. We are instructed to submit ourselves to the governing bodies over us (Romans 13:1-7). However, when those governments give commands that contradict what God has given, we are to obey God rather than men (Acts 5:25-29).

By faith, Moses refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter (Hebrews 11:24-26). He had the opportunity to live the life of comfort and luxury, perhaps even positioning himself for an office of power in the government. Instead, he chose to associate himself with the people of God. Paul said that Moses was,

...esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt; for he looked to the reward (Hebrews 11:26).

We clearly are not in the position that Moses was in, and so we have not received any kind of instruction for dealing with these particular circumstances. However, as with all of the other examples we have seen, there are lessons that we can learn from the example of Moses. We learn that we have to be able to look past the immediate circumstances that we face to see the bigger picture,

the reward that lies ahead. It is interesting that Paul makes this very point later in this context concerning the motivation of Jesus Himself:

Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God (Hebrews 12:1–2).

This attitude on the part of Moses caused Him to respond in obedience to every instruction that was given to him by God. He forsook Egypt (Hebrews 11:27), he kept the Passover (vs. 28), and he led the Israelites out of Egypt and through the Red Sea on dry land (vs. 29). If we learn to have the same attitude, it will lead us to be obedient to every instruction given to us by God. We will not be given the same instructions as Moses was given, but we can be obedient with the same vigor to the instructions that God has given to us!

Joshua and the walls of Jericho. Paul only gives one verse to Joshua's conquest of Jericho (Hebrews 11:30), but that one verse draws to mind the account. Joshua was given specific instructions concerning the conquest of this first city in Canaan (Joshua 6). They were to march around the city one time per day for 6 days, and then on the 7th day they were to march around it 7 times, and then blow the trumpets as directed by God. Because they did what they were told to do, the walls of the city fell down, and they were able to conquer Jericho.

We do not learn from this account that we are to gather an army and go to a city of the Middle East and march around it for seven days! We do learn, however, that God expects us to be obedient, even if the instructions don't make a lot of sense to us. There was no normal military strategy to God's instructions for Joshua, yet Joshua followed them just as they were given. We should learn that our responsibility is to be obedient in faith to whatever God has revealed, whether it makes sense to us or not. God told the Israelites that He gave them commands to see whether they would be obedient to Him or not. Perhaps some of His instructions were given simply to see who would obey and who would not!

“Every commandment which I command you today you must be careful to observe, that you may live and multiply, and go in and possess the land of which the LORD swore to your fathers. And you shall remember that the LORD your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, to humble you and test you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. So He humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the LORD (Deuteronomy 8:1–3).

Many more examples could be used, but hopefully these will suffice to illustrate our point: there is much to be learned from the accounts of the Old Testament, including the covenants that God made with mankind, even though we are not under those covenants. These things have been “written for our learning” (Romans 15:4). It is through these accounts that we can learn principles that God does expect His people to apply to their lives. If we dismiss the lessons or these accounts, we are missing out on a great deal of instruction that God wants us to have!

Questions...

1. If we are not bound under previous covenants, what value does their revelation serve?
2. What principles might we learn from the covenant that God made with Noah?
3. Are there any instructions that are found in God's covenant with Israel that we are obligated to keep today? Why or why not?
4. What role does Hebrews chapter 11 play in our lives under the New Testament covenant today? How are those examples cited beneficial to us today?
5. What principles can we draw from Abel's faithful sacrifice?
6. Give two lessons that we can learn and apply from the example of Abraham.
7. How did Moses show faith in the Christ by his actions? What applications can we take from his example?
8. Give one lesson that can be drawn from the example of Joshua at Jericho.

All About the Context!

Thus far in our studies, we have been thinking about foundational principles for studying the scriptures. As we move forward, we will be focusing on more specific principles for studying scripture. We will begin to think about how to look at specific passages, and draw reasonable conclusions from them. What does God want us to understand from a given passage? To begin examining this idea, we must realize that every passage is found within a context, and that context has great bearing on how we are to understand what has been written.

There is no vacuum...

Nothing in scripture was written in a vacuum. It was written for a purpose, and to particular people. It is unreasonable to pull a single verse, or group of verses from a passage and interpret their meaning outside of the context that it/they are found in. This is, perhaps, the greatest barrier to understanding God's revelation properly. Far too many people want to pick and choose what they like from the scriptures, and ignore the context surrounding the verses that they choose. For example, John 3:16 is a favorite verse of many in the religious world. They point to this one verse to confirm that God only requires people to believe on Jesus for salvation. However, they ignore the rest of what is said in that context:

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. "He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God" (John 3:16–21).

By considering the message of John 3:16 in context, it becomes abundantly clear that "whoever believes" only includes those who are not "practicing evil" but rather "does the truth." Jesus made it clear that He was not speaking of only an intellectual belief, but rather belief that leads to obedience, that is, practicing the truth!

Every verse in the scripture is placed in a context. It is important to recognize the context of any passage and understand how a particular verse, phrase, thought or idea fits within that context. We can, in fact, break down the idea of context into smaller parts. Let's start from the larger context to the smaller. We can consider a broad context, and drill down to a more specific context. Every passage sits in the broadest context of being a part of the word of God. As such, we can begin to understand its meaning by understanding how it fits into the broadest context of God's message. All of the scriptures, though being 66 distinct books, fit together to tell one grand story: the story of the salvation of mankind. We can look at the big picture and start to have an idea of how a particular passage fits into that grand context. For example, we might consider the entirety of one book, and ask how it fits into the broad context of God's message of salvation. What role do the books of Esther, or Ruth, or Job play in conveying God's overall message of salvation? While our

goal is not to delve into those texts in detail here, we can consider their general role in the midst of the scriptures. We learn a lot about God, and his plans for people through those books. For example, in the book of Ruth, we get a significant part of the story concerning the lineage of the Messiah. In Esther, we learn about God's providential care for His people. In the book of Job, we learn about the war that rages in the spiritual realm, and of God's victory over Satan. These are general lessons that we learn, and come to understand more about God and His working among mankind. These are all keys to fuller understanding of God's plan, which He has had since the beginning of time, and has revealed through His inspired word.

Next, we might examine how a particular passage fits into the context of a book. What is the broad message of the book itself, and how does the particular passage fit into that message? We can return to our earlier example of John 3:16. We might consider first the purpose of the gospel of John in the broad scheme of the scriptures as a whole. If God's revelation is given to provide the necessary information for man to come to salvation, the gospels, including the gospel of John relate the account of the Messiah who brings that salvation. John's gospel tells us about Jesus, and His role as the Son of God (and as deity) to bring salvation to mankind:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God (John 1:1-2).

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:14).

A part of that message is to relate what mankind's obligation to God is. In John 3, Nicodemus came to talk to Jesus. In the midst of that conversation, Jesus told Nicodemus:

"Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3).

This caused great consternation for Nicodemus who could not understand that Jesus was not speaking literally of being reborn from his mother's womb. Jesus went on to clarify that one must be born "of water and the Spirit" or he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. Clearly, Jesus was telling Nicodemus that he had to do something in order to be pleasing to God! Later, Jesus used the example of the children of Israel at the time of the fiery serpents to illustrate His own role in man's salvation. He would be lifted up, and those who "believe in Him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:15). The belief that one has in the Messiah is paralleled to the belief the children of Israel had in the image of the fiery serpent. If we return to that passage, we learn that those people had to do more than just have an intellectual belief that God would save them if they acknowledged the existence of the statue. They were required to do something. They had to go out into the camp, and find the statue and look upon it for their healing (Numbers 21:6-9). In much the same way, one has to follow the instructions given by Jesus for salvation.

So, as we get to the passage of John 3:16-21, we must understand how this fits into the broader context of chapter 3, which is addressing what is necessary for "entering the kingdom of God." This section is adding to the information that was found earlier in the same context, explaining how a person comes to be "born again". One would not be "born of water and the Spirit" unless he came to a belief in Jesus. This belief is an active faith, not simply an intellectual endeavor. This is evident as we get to the end of the section where Jesus speaks of how people act. The one who is "practicing evil hates the light" and will not do what he has been instructed to do. However, the one who "does the truth comes to the light..." He is the one who is obedient to the instructions of the Lord. He is the one who is "born of water and the Spirit." The one who truly believes in the Lord will be obedient to the instructions that He has given. The one who claims to believe, but does not obey the instructions, does not really believe.

What we see, when we consider the whole context of John 3, is that we cannot draw verse 16 out and try to make it stand on its own, as if that is the only message that Jesus ever delivered for His disciples. Those who build a complete theology on this one verse, have done a great disservice to the rest of what Jesus said on this occasion. They have ignored the actual instructions that Jesus provided, and instead drawn one verse out of context and defined the words in that verse to support what they want to believe, instead of what Jesus actually said. This is one reason that the context is so very important. We can completely miss the actual instructions of the Lord if we fail to examine and understand the context in which a particular verse or phrase is presented.

It has been said that anything can be proved by the Bible. That is probably true, when and if we ignore a given context. We can formulate a pretty ridiculous theology if we are not careful! Consider this completely unreasonable stringing together of passages, which clearly ignore context:

Then Judas, His betrayer, seeing that He had been condemned, was remorseful and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, saying, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." And they said, "What is that to us? You see to it!" Then he threw down the pieces of silver in the temple and departed, and went and hanged himself. (Matthew 27:3-5)

Brethren, join in following my example, and note those who so walk, as you have us for a pattern. (Philippians 3:17)

Clearly, when Paul said that we should follow the example of the Apostles, he did not mean that we should follow the example of Judas! One could only come to that conclusion by ignoring the whole context of the book of Philippians, and the rest of the New Testament scriptures! However, this illustrates the point that we can draw one verse out of a passage, and end up practicing exactly the opposite of what God would truly have us to do. Those who try to use John 3:16 to dismiss the need for any action on our part are doing just that. They have used a verse that emphasizes the need for obedience to teach that we don't have to be obedient. They are using this passage to teach exactly the opposite of what Jesus was teaching His disciples.

Historical Context

Another idea that needs to be considered when examining biblical passages is the context in which it was written historically. We do need to be very careful with this idea, as it can be abused to dismiss practices that God intends His people to follow. Historical context can help us to understand why something was written or taught when it was taught, but that does not mean that it dismisses the practice from our requirements today.

The Bible was written in history. The men who penned the scriptures were real men, who were teaching real people. Quite often, a general principle of how to handle a problem or issue was delivered into a specific situation. Consider, for example, 1 Corinthians 5. There, Paul had to deal with a specific situation: A man had his father's wife. Paul addressed this specific case of sexual immorality in the church, teaching the brethren how to deal with it. When we read this chapter, we should not conclude that this teaching only applies to the specific case of a man having his father's wife. We learn from this specific case how to deal with un-repentant sin within a congregation. We know how to deal with any type of sexual immorality, or for that matter, any kind of sin that a person refuses to turn away from.

Another example can be found in 1 Corinthians 16:1-4. There, Paul gave the Corinthian brethren instructions concerning taking up a collection of funds to help the needy saints that were in Jerusalem. This instruction was given in a very specific historical context. There was a famine in Jerusalem, and the need among the Christians was far greater than the local brethren could provide for.

So, Paul gave instructions for how that need was to be met, but other congregations providing for what was lacking. Paul gave very specific instructions concerning this practice. However, we should not think that the instructions were limited to that specific need. The instructions given provide guidance for all of the financial needs that the church faces.

It has become quite popular for people to dismiss the instructions of the New Testament simply because the passage was written to someone else, not to us. This would, of course, negate every single passage in scripture, as there are no passages that have been directly written to the current generation!

Part of the historical context is also considering the cultural context. This is another area in which we must be very cautious. Some point to the teachings of the New Testament and claim that the writers were only addressing the circumstances within the culture to which he was writing. While it can often be beneficial to understand the culture to which the inspired authors were writing, to suggest that we must understand each culture, and that the applications can only be made to those in the same culture is ridiculous. The end conclusion would again be that cannot make any kind of application to our lives today! Topics such as modesty, women's roles in the church, and family responsibilities have been completely dismissed because they were addressed to people of another time and place. Changing culture does not change the word of God. Just because our culture becomes less moral, does not mean that we can adapt the word of God to fit our norms. This is what has happened as men attempt to defend the practices of homosexuality and abortion with the Bible. God has given clear instructions, and we must make the applications that He intends. We cannot change God's word to support behaviors that have become acceptable in our culture!

A Journalistic Approach...

When we were in school, we were taught that there is a way to examine the facts, and determine the truth of any given situation. From a journalistic viewpoint, this would be delving into the available information and discovering the answers to the questions: Who? What? When? Where? Why? When we study scripture, we can certainly ascertain the truth by addressing the same questions. We can, in fact, figure out the context that a passage is written in by trying to answer those same questions. Discovering the answers will help us to make the appropriate applications from scripture to our own lives today.

Who? When we address this particular question, there are two aspects that should be considered. First, who is writing the given passage? Answering this question will answer the question of authority. When we have established that the author has the right to write the passage under consideration (that is, has been given authority by God to do so (John 16:12-15; Ephesians 3:1-7)) then we can understand that its message holds authority. He had the right to command, or give instructions at the time that he penned the message. Secondly, we must address who the passage was written to. This brings us to an important concept that we must examine: audience of a passage.

When we read a passage of scripture, it is obvious that the author was not writing that passage to us directly. We, therefore are not the *primary audience* of the author. The primary audience of any given writing is the audience for which it was originally written. So, for example, the epistles of 1st and 2nd Corinthians were written to the Christians in Corinth. They were the primary audience for the message that Paul wrote. However, Paul intended for the epistles that he wrote to be passed from one group of Christians to others:

Now when this epistle is read among you, see that it is read also in the church of the Laodiceans, and that you likewise read the epistle from Laodicea (Colossians 4:16).

Those who received the letters from the primary audience became the *secondary audience*. The letter was not written directly to them, nor addressed to them, but they could and would benefit from it anyway. Even though this secondary group may not have the exact same problems that were being addressed among the primary group, they could learn how to make applications that would benefit them. For most of the scriptures we would fall into what we would consider a secondary audience. Nothing has been written directly to us, but just like the example given above, we can surely learn much from the writings to those early churches, and know how to make applications to our own circumstances.

There is also what may be considered a *tertiary audience* in scripture. One example of this might be that of the prophecies against the nations in the books of Ezekiel and Jeremiah. God sent prophecies concerning the nations around Israel through His own prophets. The messages, especially in the book of Ezekiel, were delivered directly to the people of Israel, thus making them the primary audience. However, the message was concerning the nations around Israel, and were to be delivered to those people as well, making them the secondary audience. There were direct applications that were supposed to be made by both the Israelites and the nations around them. We, as we read the prophecies concerning the nations, become the tertiary (or third) audience. We do not have any direct applications to be made concerning those prophecies, and yet we learn a lot of principles that we can use to make sound applications to our lives.

Understanding the nature of these audiences helps us to understand how the scriptures can apply to us today. To dismiss any biblical passage simply because we are not the primary audience is to be disingenuous with the text. The things of the Old Testament are written “for our learning”, while the text of the New Testament is the covenant that has been delivered for all men of all time. Even though we might be a secondary audience, we are still expected by God to learn His will for us and put it into application.

What? As we examine a context, it is important to identify what the author intended for us to learn from his writings. What principle or doctrine is being established? When we are trying to decipher what an author was directing in a given passage, we have an obligation to be true to what is written, and not read into a passage what we want to believe or practice. Far too often, men will decide what they want to believe and then turn to the pages of the scriptures to try and support that belief. Recently, I have received two different articles through email lists that have taken this approach. The first went to great lengths to dismiss Peter’s teaching in 1 Peter 3:21, where Peter clearly declares, “There is also an antitype which now saves us—baptism...” The whole of the article was to explain why baptism does not really “now save us.” The second article was taken from Paul’s letter to the Corinthians in which he declared:

Let your women keep silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak; but they are to be submissive, as the law also says. And if they want to learn something, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is shameful for women to speak in church (1 Corinthians 14:34–35).

This particular article went to great lengths to dismiss Paul’s teachings, declaring that women really do not have any kind of limitations placed upon them. At the heart of both of these articles was the fact that the authors did not care for what the Bible taught, and therefore sought to make it say what they liked. Of course, in the end they taught the exact opposite of what the inspired writers were teaching in their writings.

Truth is not found in our desires, but rather in the revelation of God’s mind:

And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts; knowing this first, that no

prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:19–21).

We have no right to look for “private interpretation” to the scriptures. They mean what God intended for them to mean, not what we would like for them to mean. It is, therefore, our obligation to work toward understanding what God meant by the words He chose for us. We cannot seek to use the Bible to defend our own selfish desires.

The Bible teaches us how we are to conduct ourselves in every aspect of our lives. It addresses our outward actions, and it addresses our beliefs, our thoughts, our minds. As we consider *what* a passage is speaking of in its context, we can consider whether it is addressing a specific action that we should do or not do, or if it is addressing an attitude that we should have or not have. Or perhaps it is addressing a belief that we should hold, or not hold. Some passages tell us specifically what we should be doing. Others show a general idea of the nature we should have. Others still address specific tenants of belief that we should hold to. We must take all of this into consideration when we address the question: What?

When? We have, to some extent, already discussed the idea of when in a previous section concerning the historical context of a passage. The historical context in some ways matters greatly. Knowing when a passage was penned can help us to know what covenant is under consideration. As we saw in a previous study, we are only amenable to the covenant that has been given to us. If a passage was penned before our current covenant, then we know that we are not responsible for the specifics of that instruction (even though we may be able to gain great benefit from it).

In some ways, the *when* of a passage is immaterial. It is always beneficial to consider when a passage was written, but what if we cannot discern the answer to that question? There are many passages in scripture that are impossible to pinpoint on a time line. However, their significance is not diminished simply because we cannot identify exactly when they were written. One good example of this is the book of Job. There has been much debate about when Job lived. The differing opinions on the date of this book is made evident when looking at various Bible reading plans that attempt to put the Bible into chronological order. The book of Job shows up in different places based on the belief of the schedule’s author. However, we should not discount the value of the materials found within the book of Job simply because we cannot identify the time that it was written.

Trying to figure out the date of a particular passage is a worthwhile endeavor. There may be keys to understanding the passage that are found in the dating of that passage. For example, a study of the books of Kings and Chronicles reveals much overlap. Figuring out various dates (either generally, or specifically) can help us to harmonize the texts. We can, for example, identify kings by different names in the books based on the established time lines presented. The same general principle can be established in a harmonization of the four gospels. By establishing a general time line, we can harmonize the events as they occur in the various gospels. There are many who claim that the gospels are either inaccurate, or contradictory because they have not been able to put the events of each book into chronological order. Sometimes, establishing the time of a particular passage helps us to understand the nature of the history of that day. One thing we will see in future studies is that the biblical authors did not record history like we are used to. Sometimes, rather than recording a chronological history, they record a thematic one. This is why events don’t always follow the same pattern through the gospels.

We are looking for anything that can help us to accurately understand God’s will for us. We should not, however, use the dating of a passage as an excuse to ignore its content. As we mentioned earlier in this study, citing the fact that it was written a long time ago to people other than us, is

not justification for ignoring what God has written. If it is an instruction that is written within the confines of our covenant, then there will be an application for us!

Where? Where an account takes place can be important to the information provided, or it may be incidental to the intended message. This is what we previously discussed as *cultural context*. Cultural context can help us to understand what might be happening in a text, even if that cultural context does not change the application for us. For example, in Acts 17:16 and following, Luke recorded an account of Paul's travels to Athens. He speaks there of the city being "given over to idols" (Acts 17:16). Being able to study the historical city of Athens in the first century is beneficial to our understanding of what Paul was facing, and therefore feeling ("his spirit was provoked within him...") when he came to Athens. Knowing the cultural setting can be very beneficial for a deeper understanding of God's word.

Having said this, rarely is understanding the cultural context of a passage necessary for understanding the teachings found therein. If we return to our example of Acts 17, we can see that while knowing the cultural context of Athens can be helpful, it is not necessary to understanding what Paul was doing, and teaching. Luke tells us that there were idols everywhere. We don't have to confirm that through secular sources to believe what Luke wrote!

Sometimes, men use the cultural context to negate the teachings of a passage. They claim that the local culture of the people written to determines that the teaching was limited to that particular culture. One example of this fallacy is that of modesty. Many want to point to Paul's instructions concerning the need to dress modestly as being limited to the culture in which the people were living (1 Timothy 2:8-9). They say that a certain level of modesty was required in that culture, and he was simply telling the Christians to conform to the expectations of the society. They would, therefore, declare that any culture that has a more lax definition of modest, would only need to abide by the societal, or cultural norms of their own society. This notion is not supported by the scriptures. Consider, for example that Paul intended the letters he wrote to be distributed throughout other churches than the one he addressed it to (Colossians 4:16). He also, as he wrote to the Corinthians, told them that he taught the same things in all the churches:

I do not write these things to shame you, but as my beloved children I warn you. For though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet you do not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel. Therefore I urge you, imitate me. For this reason I have sent Timothy to you, who is my beloved and faithful son in the Lord, who will remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach everywhere in every church (1 Corinthians 4:14-17).

There is not a different message for different places! God has given a message that is applicable for all people for the rest of time in the new covenant. For this reason, we need to be warned that if we think that the cultural setting changes the universal meaning of a passage, we are missing the point of the passage. If we must know the culture of the people to whom God wrote His message, then we have to have more than just God's inspired word to be obedient, and therefore pleasing to Him. So, while knowing the cultural setting may be helpful, it is never going to be essential to understanding God's word.

Why? While every one of these examination questions is important, answering this particular question has the most impact on our applications of the passages under consideration. As we examine a given context, we need to try and figure out why God chose to reveal His mind.

First, let's consider that God has not been frivolous with His revelation. God delivered His word through angels, through prophets, through apostles, through inspired writers, and through His own son (Hebrews 1:1-2, 2:1-2; Ephesians 3:1-7). These men were sent to a world that would not

readily accept them, and they were killed for delivering God's word. The cost of receiving the word should be enough for us to know how important and valuable it is to God, and should be to us.

Second, we have already seen that God has preserved part of His word for us so that we can learn about Him and His interaction with His people (Romans 15:4). Even though we are not bound by the specifics of the Old Testament covenant, we can learn much from the men and women of old. We learn much from God's interactions with His people in times of old. For example, we learn we can have confidence in the promises of God because we can read so many instances in which God faithfully fulfilled His promises in times past.

Third, we must understand that God has given us His word so that we can know how to be obedient to Him. Consider Peter's instructions:

Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord, as His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue, by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust (2 Peter 1:2-4).

God has given us all things that "pertain to life and godliness." He has revealed everything that we need to live for Him, and conform ourself to His will (godliness). Paul said:

But you must continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them, and that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:14-17).

God has provided His mind through the scriptures so that we may be "complete" and "thoroughly equipped for every good work." His word provides all that we need! If what is revealed is a part of ensuring our completeness, then we need to recognize its importance. Nothing is in the scriptures by accident. God intended for it to be there!

This answers the very general question of, "Why?" As we progress through the rest of our study, we will begin to see how to answer this question on a more specific basis. Why would God choose to include something that we find in a particular context? The answer to that question will have an impact on our application. We will see that God has revealed His mind so that we will be active in His kingdom, doing the things that He wants us to do. Why be "thoroughly equipped for every good work" if we are not supposed to be busy about those good works?

Being able to identify the *who*, *what*, *when*, *where* and *why* of a particular context will help us to understand just what God intends for us to do. We move one step closer to what we are to practice!

Questions...

1. Why is it unreasonable to pull one verse from the Bible and build an entire theological argument on it?
2. What does the word *context* mean?
3. How might the scriptures be broken down into levels of context? Why is it important to recognize each of these?
4. What is an historical context? What is a cultural context? Why might each of these be important to a biblical context? Why might each be insignificant?
5. How can we use a “Journalistic Approach” to understand a biblical context?
6. What is meant by a primary audience, secondary audience, and tertiary audience? Why is it important to recognize each?
7. In general, why has God given us His written word? How does this general reason impact specific applications of biblical passages?

Speak as the Oracles of God

If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God. If anyone ministers, let him do it as with the ability which God supplies, that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belong the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen (1 Peter 4:11).

In Lesson 2 of this study, we introduced the idea of *authority*. There, we discussed briefly what authority (in general) is and the need for it in the spiritual realm. Now, we want to extend that idea a bit to begin to understand how we look at what has been revealed and make applications to our own lives. How do we understand the word? And how then do we teach it?

First, we want to examine the question: How important is the written word? The answer to this question is wrapped up in understanding what the written word actually is. Again, returning to Lesson 2 of this study, we can be reminded that Jesus promised His disciples that He would send the Holy Spirit to them, and they would be guided into “all truth” (John 16:12-15; Lesson 2, pp. 10-11). Paul, as he wrote to the Ephesian brethren, revealed how this was accomplished through him, which was the same manner as the other inspired writers:

For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for you Gentiles—if indeed you have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which was given to me for you, how that by revelation He made known to me the mystery (as I have briefly written already, by which, when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ), which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets: that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel, of which I became a minister according to the gift of the grace of God given to me by the effective working of His power (Ephesians 3:1–7).

Paul said that the Holy Spirit revealed the word to the apostles and prophets. These men wrote down the word that was revealed to them, and all who read what was written can understand this revelation of the mystery of Christ. His point is that the mystery has been revealed, or solved! We can understand what the mind of God is, as He has revealed it to these apostles and prophets through the Holy Spirit. When we understand that the words revealed through the Holy Spirit to the apostles and prophets, and written down by them, are the word of God Himself, then we have answered the question of how important the written word is! It is of utmost importance, as it reveals to us the very mind of Jehovah!

Bible Authority vs. Divine Authority

Sometimes, as we discuss the authority expressed in the scriptures, we use the term *Bible Authority*. If we understand the chain of authority that we have expressed in the first part of this lesson, then there should be no issue with that terminology. However, as is often the case, it may be difficult to fully express those ideas sufficiently. Simply using the term *Bible Authority* without setting a solid foundation seems arbitrary. Why should this book be considered authoritative? For this reason, I prefer the term *Divine Authority*. Rather than emphasizing the authority of the finished product (the Bible) we are now emphasizing the authority of the source of the material (God). Authority is inherent in God. The only reason that the Bible has authority is because it is from the source of all authority! As we discuss the principles of authority as found in scriptures, we must recognize that

we are examining principles that are authoritative because they are from God Himself. Even as we read the words of the apostles, we realize that they are not important because of the men themselves, but rather because they were simply revealing the words that God gave to them. They are not telling us their ideas and opinions, they are telling us what God revealed. This is why Peter's admonition in 1 Peter 4:11 is of such great importance (see previous page). It expresses the importance of speaking only "as the oracles of God." The apostles had no inherent authority. They only possessed the authority that had been conveyed upon them by the Lord.

Men today have no inherent authority. For their words to hold authority, they can only "speak as the oracles of God." Understanding this principle could certainly make things clearer in the religious realm! How often do we hear a question asked that begins with, "What do you think about...?" Unfortunately, the typical response begins with, "I think..." The problem with this approach is that it supposes that the opinions of men are somehow authoritative! In fact, they are not. The real question should be, "What does God think about...?" Our goal should always be to come to an understanding of the mind of God!

For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness, righteousness, and truth), finding out what is acceptable to the Lord (Ephesians 5:8–10 NKJV).

...for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord (Ephesians 5:8–10 ESV).

We should be looking at what He has revealed to understand what is "acceptable" and "pleasing" to Him! What men decide to accept is immaterial. What God has revealed constitutes truth (John 17:15-19).

Helping to Understand...

Sometimes, there are difficult things in the word of God. Peter acknowledged this very fact:

Therefore, beloved, looking forward to these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless; and consider that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation—as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures (2 Peter 3:14–16).

Because of this, there is a need to explain what is found within the scriptures. There are two examples we can bring to the reader's attention of this process. The first is the example of Philip teaching the Eunuch. When Philip came upon this man, he was reading from the prophet Isaiah, but did not understand what he was reading. He needed Philip to explain some of what was in that particular context, so that he could understand the mind of God (See Acts 8:26-40). Philip, "beginning at this Scripture, preached Jesus..." Philip was explaining what was in the passage. He was not speaking from his own opinions and ideas. He was using the principles of communication to take what was written and explain it in a way that was understandable to the Eunuch!

The second example is found in Nehemiah 8. After the return of the children of Israel from captivity, they were woefully ignorant of God's word. In Nehemiah 8, Ezra was tasked with having the law read to the people so that they would understand what God expected of them. However, it was evident that the people needed some help in understanding the word of the Lord. They needed further explanation of what was meant by the words that they were hearing. Because of this, Ezra appointed

some men to help with the understanding of the word of God:

Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodijah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, and the Levites, helped the people to understand the Law; and the people stood in their place. So they read distinctly from the book, in the Law of God; and they gave the sense, and helped them to understand the reading (Nehemiah 8:7–8).

Notice, these men gave the sense of what was being read. So, the Law was first read, then some men gave the sense, or a summary of the reading. Then, they worked to help others to understand what was being said. They were not just giving their opinions. They used the principles of communication to help the people understand what was being taught by the Scriptures.

Our responsibility is to take the written word and convey to others what God revealed. Confusion occurs, as well as contradictions, when men insert their own thoughts into God's word. Exegesis is the process of study in which a person seeks to draw out of the passage all that God intends. It is learning the mind of God. Eisegesis is a process of study where a person already has their own ideas, and reads those into the passages. The difference is that the first puts emphasis on what God desires, the second puts emphasis on what men desire.

The challenge becomes that we must take the written word, and from it learn what God has revealed for us to do. Setting aside all of our own desires and prejudices to identify what is pleasing and acceptable to the Lord is not an easy task! It will take diligence and commitment to Him.

The Need for Authority...

So as to not be too repetitive, please review Lesson 2 of this study manual to refresh your memory on some of the concepts of authority that we have already established. There, we discussed in some detail the need for authority, and an understanding of what authority, in general, is. We are now going to return to that basic concept in order to build on it with more specifics.

In nearly every aspect of our lives, we recognize and accept the need for authority. There must be standards by which we can operate, else there would be complete anarchy. Someone has to have the power to make the rules, and the rest have to be willing to submit to those rules. This is true in all areas of our lives. Consider just a few examples:

On The Job. When a person takes a job, he submits himself to the rules of the company and the boss for which he works. Most companies have an employee manual that specifies what is expected of each employee. Those who choose to ignore the rules will not be employed for very long!

Sports. There are rules that must be followed when playing any type of sport, else there will be complete chaos on the field. Can you imagine trying to play the game of baseball, for example, where one team, or even one person, insisted on rejecting the authority of the rule book? Or, imagine that someone involved in the game began to make up their own rules based solely on what they liked or preferred! There could be no rhyme nor reason to the proceedings, and it certainly could never be a fair competition.

Taking measurements. If a group of 10 people were asked to tell how tall a particular tree was, chances are there would be 10 different answers. However, if one was to produce a tape measure with which to measure the tree, the controversy would be immediately resolved. Why? Because they had a standard that they could all agree on! Once the tree is measured, there is no more guessing. The proper authority has been consulted.

Driving. Before attaining a driver's license, people have to take a test to show that they are competent to be on the roads with all the other drivers. They are given a driving manual that contains most

of the driving laws for the state in which they will be acquiring a license. Once a license is earned, drivers can choose to ignore the laws that they were taught, however that could lead to an encounter with a law enforcement officer. Failure to comply with the rules could be met with some serious consequences.

There are many other examples that could be used to illustrate the point: we recognize and accept authority in every aspect of our lives! What do these examples have in common? We can identify the proper source of authority and can submit to it. If the janitor at work tells the vice president what he should be doing, he will most likely be ignored. If one of the players in a baseball game suddenly starts making up new rules to benefit his team, we would think his actions ludicrous. If one of our men asked to guess the height of the tree insisted he was right, even after being proven wrong by the tape measure, we would think him to be crazy. And, if a pedestrian on the street wrote us a ticket and tried to force us to pay him for some made up traffic violation, we would ignore him. None of these people has the authority to make or enforce these rules! There are, however, accepted sources of authority in each of these cases. And, if those accepted sources of authority are appealed to, civil adults submit themselves to them.

Sources of Authority in the Spiritual Realm

While many will accept the role of authority in every other aspect of their lives, when it comes to spiritual matters they balk at the idea. Instead of looking for the instructions that ensure they are practicing God's will, they reject the idea of any source of authority.

However, Jesus Himself identified the source of authority in the spiritual realm:

And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Amen. (Matthew 28:18–20)

In the previous lesson, we saw that Jesus conferred part of that authority to the inspired writers, such as the apostle Paul, to record the information that He wanted His people to know for all time. This helps us to understand what the source of authority in the spiritual realm should be. Jesus is the ultimate source, and the instruction He conveyed through His inspired writers after His ascension carries that same authority.

We have the authority of Christ revealed to us through the scriptures:

For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for you Gentiles—if indeed you have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which was given to me for you, how that by revelation He made known to me the mystery (as I have briefly written already, by which, when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ), which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets: that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel, of which I became a minister according to the gift of the grace of God given to me by the effective working of His power. (Ephesians 3:1–7)

Paul received the "mystery of Christ" through Divine inspiration. What he wrote carried the same authority as if Jesus had spoken it Himself. There are many in the religious world who want to be "red letter Christians." That is, they want to limit their faith and practice to only that which is printed in red letters in a Red Letter Edition of the Bible, designating the words directly spoken by Christ. In truth, everything revealed through the Holy Spirit through the inspired writers bears the same authority as the words spoken by Jesus Himself. Keep in mind the principle we saw in the

previous lesson: Jesus knew that He had not given the disciples all of the information they needed, and that He would send the Holy Spirit to them to finish the revelation that was necessary (John 14:22-26, 16:12-15).

This is why we can know that there is a need to use all the scriptures to formulate our spiritual understanding and practice. We have to be willing (and able) to use all that God has given to us to develop our relationship with Him. This is why Paul could write to Timothy and express the importance of the use of scripture:

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:16–17)

God has given, through scripture, all that we need to be spiritually complete and absolutely prepared for every type of good work, as defined by Him.

Improper Sources of Authority

While we can look to God’s revelation to understand what He has established as the source of authority, there are other places that men turn to in an attempt to establish their authority for belief and practice in the spiritual arena. We should, therefore, address some of these improper sources of authority. These are not sources that should be appealed to or trusted!

Human traditions. People get to the point that they like to do things the way that they have always done them. Many practices have no Biblical foundation, but the participants have been involved in them for so long, they cannot imagine not participating! Jesus Himself addressed this issue, as it had already become a problem among the Jews in the first century, even before the institution of the church. This was a problem that was brought over into the church and continues to be an issue even today:

He answered and said to them, “Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition? For God commanded, saying, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and, ‘He who curses father or mother, let him be put to death.’ But you say, ‘Whoever says to his father or mother, “Whatever profit you might have received from me is a gift to God”—then he need not honor his father or mother.’ Thus you have made the commandment of God of no effect by your tradition. Hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy about you, saying: ‘These people draw near to Me with their mouth, And honor Me with their lips, But their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’ ” (Matthew 15:3–9)

Just because something has become traditional does not make it right! The Jews had many things that they did that were traditional that directly violated the instructions of God. Jesus condemned such practices. Traditions that are contrary to God’s instructions today are just as wrong as they were in the first century!

Human desires. This is closely related to the previous point, as human traditions find their origin in human desires. Our natural inclination is to gravitate toward the things that we like to do. The problem arises when our desires are not the same as God’s desires (they are rarely the same when left to our own devices). Going all the way back to Jeremiah’s time, we can see that this was a problem:

O LORD, I know the way of man is not in himself; It is not in man who walks to direct his own steps. (Jeremiah 10:23)

Men today still think that they should “direct [their] own steps.” They devise practices that make them happy when it comes to their religious beliefs, and the work and worship of the church. Lat-

er in our studies we will be taking a much closer look at these aspects of our service before God. For now, we need to see that our desires are not what should drive our practices, but rather God's desires, which He has recorded for us through the pens of His inspired writers. Just because we like some practice does not mean that God has approved or accepted it.

Human creeds or Confessions of Faith. Many religious bodies have official written documents, framing what disciples of those particular faiths are supposed to believe, teach, and practice. These are not aids to help their followers understand the Bible, but rather books that are written by man, defining what must be believed. Those who are not willing to conform, at least in most cases, are restricted from being a part of the organization. Those who will not conform to the denomination's creed certainly are not permitted to be leaders or teachers in their churches.

Practices can not be prescribed by men. Men only have the ability to use the authority that Christ has dispersed. When books of faith contradict what is given by God, then we know that is a source of authority that is not approved of by God!

The Old Testament Scriptures. Many people today make an attempt to appeal to the practices of the Old Testament to either accept or reject something. While there is much that can be learned from the Old Testament scriptures (Romans 15:4), it is imperative to understand that Christ, with His death, wiped out the requirements of the Old Testament scripture:

For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity. And He came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near. For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father. (Ephesians 2:14–18)

When we discuss specific practices, we need to be very cautious about appealing to Old Testament practices. There are some principles that we are intended to draw from the Old Testament, but God has not left us that scripture as instructions on how to act, specifically, under the New Testament covenant.

Past family practices. This could be one of the hardest problems to get past when trying to share the uncompromised gospel with people today. They are convinced that "Whatever was good enough for grandmother is good enough for me!" It should be easy for us to realize that people are imperfect and can be mistaken. If we follow our family into error simply because we overvalue their authority, we end up all being deceived (Matthew 15:12-14). Our relatives, if they have a proper respect for God, would want us to follow the truth, even if that leads away from the family history!

We must seek to follow the true source of authority: Jesus Christ and His revealed word. If we are distracted by those things that pose as legitimate sources of authority, but are not, we will be led far away from God and His true will for us.

Listening to the Lord...

In 1 Samuel 3, the account of Samuel's life as an assistant to Eli the high priest begins. As Samuel was lying in his bed God spoke to him, but Samuel did not know what was happening. Three times he heard the voice of the Lord, and three times he went to Eli, thinking he was the one who had called him. Finally, Eli realized what was happening and told Samuel what he needed to do:

Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down; and it shall be, if He calls you, that you must say, 'Speak, LORD, for Your servant hears.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place. (1 Samuel 3:9)

Samuel did as he was instructed by Eli, and sure enough, the Lord came and spoke to him, telling him what was going to happen. This was the beginning of Samuel's role as a prophet and the last judge over Israel.

We are particularly interested in the attitude shown by Samuel as he followed Eli's instructions. This attitude was evident throughout the life of Samuel, even from this young age. In his example, we see a boy (1 Samuel 3:1) who was willing to wait on the word of the Lord to be spoken to him. Throughout his lifetime, it is evident that he maintained this respect for the word of the Lord, responding through his actions with, "Speak Lord, for your servant hears." This attitude reflects the fact that Samuel viewed God as authoritative: His word meant something important! It also reflected that Samuel viewed himself as a servant. As a servant, he was under the authority of God and was to respond in obedience to Him.

This is the very same type of attitude we should have toward the word of the Lord. Things have changed since Samuel's time, in that God does not audibly speak to individuals today, but He has revealed His mind to us. The Hebrew writer reveals how this transition has taken place:

God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds... (Hebrews 1:1–2)

In previous lessons, we have established the process through which we have the mind of Christ revealed to us through the Holy Spirit and the inspired apostles. Jesus told His apostles that He would send the Holy Spirit who would reveal unto them "all truth" (John 16:13). If the Holy Spirit did just as the Lord Himself claimed that He would, then those first century apostles received all truth! If that is the case, then there is no new revelation for men to receive today, as that would be something other than "all truth" which was received by the apostles in the first century!

Paul confirms this idea in his letter to the Galatian brethren:

I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel, which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed. (Galatians 1:6–9)

Paul could already, while in the first century, declare that the gospel had been delivered. If someone came preaching some other message than what the Galatians had already heard, they could know it was not truth. Anything that has been "revealed" after the life of the inspired men of the first century (who received all truth) cannot be truth!

Once we discover that the Bible contains "all truth" as revealed by God through the inspired writers, we must learn how to decipher it. Having the proper attitude, the attitude of Samuel, will help us to ensure that we understand and implement God's will just as He intends. While some want to push the idea that we can have different interpretations of scripture and still all be correct, that is simply not possible. Until we understand a passage the way that God intended for it to be understood, we cannot have the right interpretation! We can illustrate disagreement over how a passage is to be understood in this manner:

- I can be right, and you can be wrong.
- You can be right, and I can be wrong.
- We can both be wrong.

- We CANNOT both be right!

Only when we come to understand what God truly communicated can we have the correct interpretation. God is not the author of confusion (1 Corinthians 14:33). If men disagree over what God has revealed, then men are the ones who have a problem in understanding. God has revealed His mind so that mankind can understand, and understand it alike!

How God Communicates

As we begin this section of our study, we want to make it clear that God has communicated His mind in the very same manner that men communicate. We are not here discussing the procedure of His revelation, as we have already discussed that to some extent. Here we want to consider the methodology of His communication. For communication to be effective, one party has to express an idea in some way that a second party can comprehend and put into practice.

For many years, a common manner of expressing the way that this communication occurred has been shortened down to a memorable acronym: CENI (command, example, and necessary inference). However, this manner of establishing practices from scripture has come under attack, with many claiming that it is unbiblical. This is one area that we sometimes seem to get hung up on the terminology, rather than understanding what that terminology expresses. There is some irony in this, as the point is to convey a principle, and instead of grasping that principle, we spend much more time arguing over the validity of the terms! Doy Moyer, in an attempt to head off such disagreement, has expressed the methodology of communication (all communication) in slightly different terms.¹ Rather than using the aforementioned terms, Moyer uses terms that reflect the manner in which all communication takes place. If we want someone to comprehend what is in our mind, we must relate it to them in a very limited number of ways.

In an article entitled *It's How Communication Works*², Moyer expressed the idea in this way:

How is anyone's will communicated?

We start by asking this basic question because it gets right to the heart of the issue. How do you communicate your will to someone else? If you want to communicate your desire that someone do or consider something, how would you go about it?

I have searched long and hard. I have studied works in interpretation and communication, and I'm trying to boil this down to the basic elements. The following ways are how anyone communicates anything:

- 1. We tell someone what we want. This is direct and can be an order or statement.*
- 2. We show someone what we want and how to do it. Illustrations and examples are part of this process.*
- 3. We imply what we expect others to get by what we say or show. This can even be done through gestures and silence.*

Can you think of any other way than to tell, show, or imply what you want? This is logic at the most fundamental level, and the principles we are discussing here are what we would call self-evident. Something is self-evident when it is true in itself. Such is the case with tell, show, and imply. How can we demonstrate this?

¹ Doy Moyer has written extensively on the subject of Bible Authority, and has given this author permission to reproduce some of his materials in this study booklet. You can read more of brother Moyer's work on his website: <http://www.mindyourfaith.com/biblical-authority.html>

² <http://www.mindyourfaith.com/the-authority-blog/its-how-communication-works>

It is obvious that any attempt at communication will utilize one or more of these ways of communication. Try to communicate without it! I would issue this challenge if you disagree with what I'm saying: go ahead and disagree, but don't tell me anything about it, don't show me anything about it, and don't imply your disagreement. To do so would be self-defeating, for you will utilize the very process you are denying. Such cannot be done, and we would logically collapse on ourselves by thinking otherwise. Tell, show, and imply are logically self-evident. No further proof is needed, and objections to this are self-defeating and logically incoherent.

Does this come from God or man? Since our ability to 1) think logically, and 2) communicate comes from God, then it does come from God as the way communication works. It is, again, so fundamental that we cannot communicate without it. God made us creatures with the need and ability to communicate, and this is how it is done. To help us understand God's authority, then, we need to start with the logical premises and show that there is no way around how communication works. We are simply reminding people of the fundamental logic that underlies all communication, including God's.

We understand how this process works when it comes to our interactions with other men. If our boss, or our teacher, or our coach wants us to do something, one or more of these methods of communicating their desires will be implemented. We do not have any problem with this process, as it is simply the way in which one person conveys what he wants another person to do. It is, as is the article's premise, how communication works!

Moyer connected these thoughts to the idea of CENI in a very profitable manner:

The CENI Connection

Many are familiar with the terminology, "Command, Example, and Necessary Inference." These are the very concepts that are often challenged in discussions about God's authority. In fact the acronym CENI has been the object of much ridicule and is often used pejoratively.

"Command, Example, and Necessary Inference" are simply the formal, specific ways of saying "tell, show, and imply." The terms appeal to the very same process. Therefore, when people complain about CENI as if there is something fundamentally flawed about it, they really are showing that the fundamental logic has not been thought through. This is exactly why we need to talk about it. (Note: I prefer TSI, as I'll refer to it, to CENI for the simple reason that it is more encompassing of the communication process – "tell" includes more than just commands; however, the point remains that CENI is just a specified way of speaking about the same process).

The problem is not with CENI itself. I would suggest that if we do a better job explaining the foundational logic of communication, there wouldn't be such a backlash later against CENI as some alleged man-made construct. It's not a man-made construct at all; it's the fancy talk for how communication works at the most basic of levels. God tells us what He wants; He shows us what He wants, and He implies what He expects us to get. It's up to us to think it out and think it through.

Consequently, I have, a few times, challenged those who don't like CENI. When challenged, they have typically backed up admitted something like this: "Well, I agree that God communicates that way, but I don't like how it is applied." Now you might disagree over some of the applications, but don't attack the principles themselves, for that is attacking the communication process, and it is self-defeating to do so. Start with a solid foundation.

There are many who want to insist that CENI is a failed hermeneutic, and needs to be replaced. However, even those making such a claim have nothing with which to replace it. It should be pointed out that in reality, CENI, or Moyer's Tell, Show, Imply (TSI) is not a hermeneutic, but rather the foundation of such. Consider Moyer's last section of the cited article:

Is CENI a Hermeneutic?

Is CENI or TSI a hermeneutical method? I sometimes see the criticism of it as a failed hermeneutic (method of interpretation), but this misses the point of it. TSI is foundational to any form of communication. It is inherent in any spoken or written communication (not just in studying the Bible). It is not, in itself, a hermeneutic, but is rather foundational to any hermeneutic. Any hermeneutic will assume the self-evident reality of TSI.

Hermeneutics is the science of interpretation. It is what we as the recipients (readers, hearers) bring to the communication process. TSI, on the other hand, is inherent in what the communicator gives. That is, we, the readers or listeners, do not provide TSI; we take the TSI that is given to us and try to understand what that means. TSI, then, is not a method of interpretation; it is the material that we interpret. We might misinterpret it. We might fail to get out of it what is intended. We might make more of examples and inferences that we ought to. But it is nevertheless the raw material that we use in order to understand what the author or speaker intends. There is no getting around this. No one interprets anything that is not first told, shown, or implied.

What is told, shown, and implied are the bare bones of what we work with when we interpret. Criticizing it as a failed hermeneutic is to misunderstand it at the most basic level. Instead of criticizing it, let's recognize it for what it is (inherent in the communication process) and then deal with how we should properly understand the statements, examples, and implications.

It's how communication works, and how communication works is fundamental to the process of understanding how God communicates with us. Most of the time we just communicate. We don't usually stop and think about the process. For understanding how God communicates His will to us, however, sometimes we just need to start with the basics. What has He said? What examples has He provided? What is to be inferred from the material He has provided? It's up to us to properly interpret it all.

Whether we call it CENI or TSI or some other acronym that is descriptive of the process, we need to understand that we are merely describing the way that communication occurs. It is how we communicate with one another, and it is the basis by which God has communicated with us. Through His scriptures, He has revealed His mind in each of these ways.

It behooves us to respond to what God has communicated. When we have the attitude of Samuel, we will not seek to dismiss what God has revealed because we have convinced ourselves that we are merely following a man made hermeneutic. What is revealed in scripture (through God telling us something, showing us something, or providing information from which we as reasonable people can infer something) is the mind of God (1 Corinthians 2:10-11).

All of this is God speaking to us. How we respond to what He has revealed will determine if we have a relationship with Him. Convincing ourselves that we are somehow more spiritual because we reject the manner in which God has revealed His mind is a spiritually destructive ploy of the devil himself, to draw us away from the will of the Lord.

Instead, we should simply say: Speak Lord, for your servant hears.

Questions...

1. What difference is there between the terminology *Bible Authority* versus *Divine Authority*?
2. How might we help to give the meaning of a passage, without inserting our man-made opinions into the principles expressed?
3. List at least 3 improper sources of authority in the spiritual realm.
4. What kind of attitude did Samuel have when the Lord spoke to Him? How might we reflect this same type of attitude today?
5. Describe 3 ways that we communicate with other people today. How are these the same/different than the ways that God has communicated with us?
6. What do the acronyms *CENI* and *TSI* stand for?
7. What is a hermeneutic? Should we view CENI or TSI as a hermeneutic? Why or why not?

When God is Silent...

In the last lesson, we looked at the need for us to “speak as the oracles of God” (1 Peter 4:11). That premise is at the heart of “finding out what is acceptable to the Lord” (Ephesians 5:10). The question is often raised, however: “What if God has not spoken?” In other words, what if God is silent on a particular issue?

There are many who choose to rely upon God’s silence as permission to do the things that they desire. They often approach their actions from the premise: “God didn’t say not to!” It quickly becomes evident that such a one believe that they can do anything that the Lord has not specifically forbidden. With this lesson, we want to examine this idea, and determine if the silence of God is either permissive or restrictive.

Is God Silent?

The first question that needs to be asked when one claims that silence grants permission for action is to see if God is really silent on the subject. In reality, there are very few things that one might find that God has truly been silent on. To think that God has been silent on a particular topic would mean that God has not spoken on that topic in any way. Consider, for example, the argument made by the Hebrew writer:

Therefore, if perfection were through the Levitical priesthood (for under it the people received the law), what further need was there that another priest should rise according to the order of Melchizedek, and not be called according to the order of Aaron? For the priesthood being changed, of necessity there is also a change of the law. For He of whom these things are spoken belongs to another tribe, from which no man has officiated at the altar. For it is evident that our Lord arose from Judah, of which tribe Moses spoke nothing concerning priesthood. And it is yet far more evident if, in the likeness of Melchizedek, there arises another priest who has come, not according to the law of a fleshly commandment, but according to the power of an endless life. For He testifies: “You are a priest forever According to the order of Melchizedek” (Hebrews 7:11–17).

Here, the inspired writer makes two significant points. First, he wrote of the fact that God had not spoken (was silent) about members of the tribe of Judah serving as priests. From his instruction, it is clear that one who was from this tribe could not serve as the priest under the Old Testament law, because God had not given permission for him to do so. A change in the priesthood that was established would have to take place before he could serve! Second, this writer made it clear that God had not been silent on the issue of the priesthood. He had given specific instructions that the priesthood was to descend through the tribe of Levi, in the family of Aaron. So, when God spoke concerning what He wanted, all other options were extinguished. Though God did not speak directly to the possibility of one from Judah serving as a priest, He did speak to that idea by specifying that the priests had to come from the tribe of Levi.

Sometimes, when it comes to sinful practices, people will declare that the Lord is silent, and therefore we are permitted to do as we please. This attitude is based on the premise that God must identify every single thing that a person could do, and name it as prohibited by name. Clearly such an approach would be impossible. With changing times, cultures and technologies, it would not take long to come up with some thing that God had not specified, or else we would have lists of sinful

practices found in the scriptures coming before the invention of the practice itself! Quite often, those things that people declare that God has not spoken about have been generally (rather than specifically) addressed by God. Consider the instructions of the apostle Paul:

I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God (Galatians 5:16–21).

After a lengthy list of sins, Paul adds the phrase, “and the like”. He was acknowledging that this was not a comprehensive list. We should be able to see practices that are similar in their nature to the sins listed, and know that God does not approve of them. To say that some practice that is not specifically condemned is permitted stands contrary to Paul’s teaching in this passage.

In some instances, God has spoken very clearly on a topic, and men twist the scriptures to make it look as if God has not spoken on a topic. The practice of homosexuality comes to mind as an example. God has clearly spoken on the topic, condemning it in no uncertain terms (Romans 1:26-32). However, proponents of this sinful practice declare that passages such as Romans 1 are really only addressing some “uncommitted, or corrupted, or pagan form of homosexual love.” In other words, God perhaps condemned the homosexual practices of the idol’s temple prostitutes, but He did not say anything about committed same-sex relationships! Of course, to argue such a premise is ludicrous, and completely ignores all that God has written on the subject. He has not, in fact, been silent. Trying to find a way to dismiss a passage in our own minds because it says something that is contrary to what we want to practice does not change God’s instructions on the matter.

Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God (1 Corinthians 6:9–11).

Some of the same principles are true when it comes to practices within the church. Many of the additions and innovations to the worship of the church are founded in the idea, “God didn’t say not to!” Again, just because God did not specifically condemn something does not mean that He has been silent on the subject. Consider the practice of instrumental music in worship. Many churches have adopted this practice, and think it strange that anyone would reject it. They say that God has not condemned the practice, so it is fine for us to participate in! But, God has not been silent on the topic of music in worship to Him:

Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is. And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord, giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another in the fear of God (Ephesians 5:17–21).

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord. (Colossians 3:16)

God has specified what is pleasing and acceptable to Him. Much like our earlier reference to the priests coming from the tribe of Levi, we see here that God does not have to specify everything

that has been excluded. God didn't have to say at the time He appointed the Levites to serve in the capacity of priests that every other tribe by name was excluded. Likewise, when God has specified that "singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord" is the accepted manner of music in worship, He did not have to specify every thing excluded by name! "God didn't say not to!" is not an acceptable way to approve a practice because it ignores what God did say!

In reality, God has not been silent on much. He has spoken to almost everything we can conceive in our minds, either in a direct way or in a more general way. We will plan to consider these ideas in more detail later in this lesson.

When God is Silent...

Maybe we have determined that God is really silent on a particular topic. Perhaps then we can question whether that silence is permissive or prohibitive. Does God's silence on a topic give us permission to act, or is it intended to keep us from acting?

In previous lessons we saw that we are to "speak as the oracles of God", which means that we speak in the way that God has spoken. We relate what He has given. We can know that God approves of something by the fact that He has spoken to it. When we decide to act on the silence of God, we act presumptuously. We choose to act in a way in which God has not authorized because we have decided that it is good (and therefore must be accepted by Him).

We should realize that God has revealed all that He intended to reveal. He has not been "accidentally silent" on any topic! Consider what Doy Moyer has to say in his book, *Mind Your King*.

If God truly is silent about a matter, there would only be a couple of reasons why this would be so: 1) He intends to be silent. In this case, we do not have the mind of God on the matter, and we can either presume upon His mind, or refrain from such presumption. Given the principles of honoring God in Scripture, which is more appropriate? We know the answer. 2) He intended to say something about the issue, but failed or forgot. This is not an option because it would make God incompetent. If God truly is silent, then He intended to be silent and we ought to respect that.¹

In essence, we should treat God's silence as just that: silence. The mere fact that God has been silent should not be looked upon as either permissive or restrictive. It is, in fact, simply the absence of information, and should not be appealed to for either approval or restriction. In the absence of other information, we cannot possibly know what God would want in areas He has not spoken.

The Bible is full of warnings to only listen to what God has said, and to be careful not to add to or take away from His revelation. Consider this list, as compiled by Moyer:²

"Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it (Deuteronomy 12:32).

"The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law (Deuteronomy 29:29).

Do not add to His words, Lest He rebuke you, and you be found a liar (Proverbs 30:6).

Be strong and of good courage, for to this people you shall divide as an inheritance the land which I swore to their fathers to give them. Only be strong and very courageous, that you may observe to do according to all the law which Moses My servant commanded you; do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may prosper wherever you go (Joshua 1:6-7).

¹ Moyer, Doy. *Mind Your King, Lessons and Essays on Biblical Authority*. (Birmingham, Moyer Press 2016) 53

² *Ibid.* 54-55

And when they say to you, "Seek those who are mediums and wizards, who whisper and mutter," should not a people seek their God? Should they seek the dead on behalf of the living? To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them (Isaiah 8:19–20).

But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does (James 1:25).

Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, "If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:31–32).

Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively transferred to myself and Apollos for your sakes, that you may learn in us not to think beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up on behalf of one against the other (1 Corinthians 4:6).

Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son (2 John 9).

For I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book (Revelation 22:18–19).

Since we have heard that some who went out from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your souls, saying, "You must be circumcised and keep the law"—to whom we gave no such commandment— (Acts 15:24)

If anyone teaches otherwise and does not consent to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which accords with godliness, he is proud, knowing nothing, but is obsessed with disputes and arguments over words, from which come envy, strife, reviling, evil suspicions... (1 Timothy 6:3–4)

O Timothy! Guard what was committed to your trust, avoiding the profane and idle babblings and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge—by professing it some have strayed concerning the faith. Grace be with you. Amen (1 Timothy 6:20–21).

Notice the theme throughout these passages is that those who are followers of God should keep themselves within the confines of what He has revealed to us. The presumption that God would approve of activities that are not revealed by Him in His word is without foundation in His word! In fact, just the opposite is evident. He knows what He has revealed and why He has revealed it. For us to act in some way beyond what He has told us He approves is condemned!

Must God be Specific?

Sometimes we misconstrue the way in which God reveals His mind as being "silence." If we cannot find something that specifically addresses the issue that is on our mind, we think that God has been silent. As we saw earlier in the lesson, there are very few things on which God is truly silent. He has spoken to most things in one way or another. Sometimes, instead of speaking to something directly (specifically) He speaks more generally. In this way, God authorizes things. He reveals what is approved by Him in either a very specific way or in a more general way. Both convey His mind in the matter!

Earlier in this study, we saw how this idea might be applied to sinful practices. However, the same ideas are true when it comes to all of our practices in the religious realm. God has the ability to

reveal what He wants from His children in either specific ways, or more generally. Keep in mind that as we look at the manner that God gives instruction, it is no different than the way that we communicate with one another. It is not that we are here making up “rules” for establishing Bible authority (or Divine authority) so much as we are taking note of the way that we communicate and see that these logical principles apply to what God has said as well.

Sometimes instruction is given very specifically, while other times it is given more generally. How information is given impacts how much freedom we have to make choices in the manner that we implement the instructions. First, consider a secular example. If your neighbor gives you \$20 and asks you to go to the store and buy her a case of diet Dr. Pepper, she has been very specific. If you were to buy her coffee instead of diet Dr. Pepper, it would be clear that you have not followed her instructions. If you bought Dr. Pepper and a loaf of bread, you have not followed the instructions that were given. To change the item, or to add to it are presumptuous acts, beyond what had been provided in the instructions. However, if that same neighbor gave you the money and asked for you to go to the store and get her something to drink, your choices would be much broader. That coffee would now be a viable option, as would any number of other beverages: juice, sodas, milk, etc. When a task is given, but the specifics are not, one has much more freedom to act. Parents learn this principle pretty quickly when giving instructions to children. If they want a job done a particular way, they learn to give very explicit instructions. A child given a specific list of how to do something has much less freedom to choose how to accomplish the task than one who is simply told to do something generally. For example, suppose a child was given the instructions that she was to “fix breakfast.” If left at that, this child would have a lot of freedom to choose what to fix. However, if she were told to “fix cereal, toast, milk and juice for breakfast,” the amount of individual choices that she has dwindles considerably.

The same principles are true in the way that God communicates. When He provides specific instructions, there is little room for personal choices in the manner in which one obeys. Consider a couple of examples:

Noah and the Ark. Noah was told to build the ark from Gopher wood (Genesis 6:14). God was very specific. In fact, the word that is translated as ‘gopher’ is found only this one time in God’s instructions to Noah. While we may not know exactly what type of wood Noah was to use, we can be certain that Noah knew! The instructions given to him were clear, and specific. He was not to use any other kind of wood, because God told him specifically what kind to use. Noah was also given specific dimensions to which the ark was to be built (Genesis 6:15). It was to be 300 cubits long, 50 cubits wide and 30 cubits tall. Noah could not change these elements and continue to be pleasing to God. The rest of the world was being destroyed because of the wickedness of mankind. If Noah disobeyed, he would be as guilty as they, and suffer their fate. He could not choose to change the wood with which he built, nor could he decide that different dimensions would be better!

There were, however, still some elements of building the ark that would be left up to Noah. Though God specified some things, there were other things that He did not specify. God did not specify (as far as has been revealed to us) where Noah was to get the gopher wood he used to build the ark. He had the freedom to make a choice about where he could get the supplies. God did not specify how that wood was to be harvested for the job. Could Noah use a saw to cut the trees? Of course. Could he use a cart to carry the boards to the construction site? Could he drag them with mules or horses? These choices were left to Noah because God did not specify them! As soon as an instruction was specified, Noah’s ability to choose what to do was limited. The more specific God is, the less freedom man has to make decisions about how to accomplish what God has instructed. This is a principle we have no problem understanding when it comes to our own communication, and yet many are confused by it when it comes to God’s communication!

David Moving the Tabernacle. In Exodus 25, in the midst of God's instructions for the tabernacle and its furnishings, we find instructions for the construction of the ark of the covenant. There, God told Moses that the ark was to have rings mounted to it, so that poles could be inserted by which the Levites (namely the Kohathites) would carry the ark on their shoulders. In Numbers 7, Moses recorded the distribution of carts for the moving of the tabernacle, and he specifically noted that none of the carts were given to the sons of Kohath because they were to carry the ark (and other furniture from the tabernacle) by the poles, and on their shoulders (Numbers 7:9).

Move forward in time from those instructions to 2 Samuel 6, where king David was intent on moving the ark of the covenant, to bring it back to Jerusalem. They built a new cart for it, and had the sons Abinadab (whose house the ark had been kept at for some time, see 1 Samuel 7) to escort the ark. One son, Ahio, went before the cart, leading the oxen that pulled it. Uzzah, a second son of Abinadab either sat on the cart with the ark, or walked along beside it. When they reached Nachon's threshing floor, the oxen pulling the cart stumbled, and Uzzah reached out his hand to steady the ark, presumably so that it would not fall off. It is recorded for us that his actions angered the Lord:

Then the anger of the LORD was aroused against Uzzah, and God struck him there for his error; and he died there by the ark of God (2 Samuel 6:7).

The term for 'error' in this verse can also be 'irreverence'. This is an interesting depiction, as it seems that David, Abinadab, and his sons were working diligently to show great honor to the ark of the Lord. However, because they were not obedient to how God instructed their action was 'error' or 'irreverence'.

David figured out how to move the ark before trying again. 2 Samuel 6:13 tells us that when he went back to retrieve the ark after 3 months, he had "those bearing the ark" who had "gone six paces," which indicates that he had men who were carrying the ark, and walking, just as the Lord had instructed. He was, therefore, able to bring the ark to Jerusalem.

In each of these examples, we see the need to do just what God said to do when He has specified his instructions. We cannot choose to do something different, just because we think that it might be better. David learned that lesson the hard way! When God has been specific, He intends for the revealed specific to be adhered to.

We can see the same principle at work in the instructions that God has given to the church. We used the example of instrumental music earlier in our study. In Ephesians 5:17-21, and Colossians 3:16, God specified that what is pleasing to Him when it comes to music in worship to Him is singing. Because He has been specific, all other options are ruled out. Just like when God told the Israelites to carry the ark of the covenant, it ruled out putting it on a cart. It does not matter how much better we think we are able to do something, when we go beyond what has been revealed, we are violating God's instructions!

Sometimes, however, God is not specific in what He has instructed. Sometimes, He only gives general instructions, and expects that his people are able to work out the manner in which those instructions are implemented.

For example, in 1 Corinthians 14, as Paul was giving instructions concerning how the disciples in Corinth were to conduct themselves in the assemblies of the church, particularly in regards to the use of spiritual gifts, he told them:

Let all things be done decently and in order (1 Corinthians 14:40).

While Paul had given some specific instructions concerning the use of those spiritual gifts (such as

how one who could speak in tongues was to remain quiet if there was no interpreter), he did not go into great detail about how to make sure “all things” were done in a decent and orderly manner. He did not, for example, insist that there is an official “church of Christ worship service” with every detail itemized to ensure the instruction was not violated. Rather, he intended for the local church to work out how to compose the assembly in a way that did not violate the general principle.

A similar point could be made from Jesus’ instructions to His disciples as He prepared to ascend to Heaven:

And He said to them, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned (Mark 16:15–16).

As Jesus gave these parting instructions, He did so without specificity. He told them to “Go into all the world and preach the gospel...” He did not give any specific instruction on either where to go, or how to get there. They could choose to go by boat, by foot, by donkey, by cart, or by camel. They could choose to go to Egypt, to Asia, to Europe, or to stay in Palestine. Because Jesus did not specify where they were to go, or how they were to get there, they had a lot of freedom to make decisions for themselves. He did, however, specify what they were to preach: the gospel. They were not sent forth to build hospitals, houses, or church buildings. They were not sent out to feed all the hungry. They were sent forth to preach the gospel message. And that is exactly what we see throughout the New Testament: men going into all the world to preach the gospel message. In fact, they were so successful at this task that Paul could write, some 30 years later, that they had done just what Jesus had instructed them to do:

...if indeed you continue in the faith, grounded and steadfast, and are not moved away from the hope of the gospel which you heard, which was preached to every creature under heaven, of which I, Paul, became a minister. (Colossians 1:23)

The logical conclusion we can reach from looking at these examples is that God does not have to be specific when He reveals His mind. Revealing His will in a more general way does not mean that He has not spoke (i.e., has been silent). He has merely spoken in a general manner.

Practical Applications...

As mentioned earlier, the more specific an instruction is, the less choice is left to the hearer to be obedient. As we evaluate God’s instructions on any given topic (and we must compile all that God has revealed, to ensure we have the fullness of His instruction) we can gauge how much freedom we have to fulfill the instruction by how specific His instructions are. For example, when giving instructions for how money was to be taken up for the work given to the church, the apostle Paul wrote:

Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given orders to the churches of Galatia, so you must do also: On the first day of the week let each one of you lay something aside, storing up as he may prosper, that there be no collections when I come (1 Corinthians 16:1–2).

While other instruction was given concerning the manner of the contribution, as well as the distribution or use of the monies collected, this is the only passage that provides instruction for *when* the collection is to be taken up. It also provides instructions concerning the *way* that the contribution is to be taken up. Two things are specified by Paul:

- This was to be an offering made by individuals to a common treasury, so that it was available when needed. This was a free will type offering, and no definite amount was established.
- This was to be done on the first day of the week.

Having these elements specified means that God has not left much in those areas up to the judgment of men. We cannot simply decide that a car wash is a better way to raise money for the church. Nor can we decide that we can take up a collection on other days than that which was specified in the instruction. By doing so, we would go beyond that which was revealed, and act in a presumptuous manner. We have already seen that such would be foolhardy on our part!

There are, however, some areas in the instructions concerning the collection that are not specified, and thus left to the discretion of those participating. A group can decide the logistics of having the collection taken up, such as whether to pass a basket around, or putting a collection basket where members can fulfill their instructions. Each individual is given the freedom to contribute in a manner that is a reflection of what God has prospered him.

What we find when we delve into a study of just about any instruction that God has given is that there are elements that are specific, and others that are general. As we discover God's will on a matter, we must recognize when He is specific, and stay within the confines of His specific instructions. When He asks for service in a very specific manner, we have no right to expand His instructions, or change it to something we think we would like better! When He speaks in a more general way, we have more freedom to choose how to obey His instructions. To fall back to our previous example (Mark 16:15-16), we can "go into all the world" by any means that is convenient to us, but when we go we must do what He specifically instructed: preach the gospel. We can't change the message, as that work has been directly specified for us!

Questions...

1. When challenged by the prospect of the “silence of the scriptures,” what should be our first question?
2. When God is silent on a topic, what are the only two reasons He might be so?
3. What do the scriptures say concerning the responsibility of believers to stay within the confines of God’s revealed word?
4. Is it true that God is silent if He is not specific in His instructions? Why or why not?
5. What aspects of the instructions for building the ark were specific? What aspects were more general?
6. What did David do wrong when moving the Ark of the Covenant? What had God specified?
7. When instructions are specific, how much freedom is given to us to choose how we are going to fulfill the instructions?
8. Give an example of how specific instructions are used in typical communication, and explain how the specificity of those instructions impacts personal judgment in fulfilling them.

What is Expedient?

In the previous lesson, we looked at how sometimes God gives specific instructions, and sometimes He gives only general instructions. We noted that when God gives specific instructions, we are left with little room for personal judgment on the manner in which we fulfill the instructions. We must simply do what God has instructed. However, when He only gives general instructions, we are left with far more judgment on how to obey. The freedom we have to implement our choices can be described as *expedient*.

Dictionary.com defines expedient as:

adjective

1. *tending to promote some proposed or desired object; fit or suitable for the purpose; proper under the circumstances:*

It is expedient that you go.

2. *conducive to advantage or interest, as opposed to right.*
3. *acting in accordance with expediency, or what is advantageous.*

noun

4. *a means to an end:*

The ladder was a useful expedient for getting to the second floor.

5. *a means devised or employed in an exigency; resource; shift:*

Use any expedients you think necessary to get over the obstacles in your way.

The idea behind an expedient is that it accomplishes a task in a given situation. When a particular task is given, but specific instructions are not provided, then one can choose what is the most expedient way to achieve the desired end.

Secular Examples...

This is, as with some of our previous topics, an area where our secular experience can help us with understanding the spiritual applications. We have very little trouble identifying the use of expedients in the secular realm. For example, if a parent were to tell his child to clean his room, the child would have many options. He knows that he is to start with the room in the current condition, and work on it until it fits the description of what the parent would call “clean.” But, does he clean up the Legos first? Or the stuffed animals? Does he work on the bookshelves, or the floor? Does he make his bed first, or last? The manner in which he accomplishes the task that has been given to him are of little concern. He cannot, however, go outside and play and claim that he is doing what his parent told him to do!

In the work place, the doing what is expedient is expected of the employee. If a boss had to specify every single detail of how to accomplish a task, he might as well do it all himself! Instead, supervisors expect to be able to give more general instructions, and know that the employees will use the

most expedient solutions available to them to complete the task. Any tools that are available to complete the task at hand are acceptable for use.

Biblical Examples...

Of course, our primary concern is how we see the idea of expedients in a biblical context. Some object to an appeal to expedients, as the idea is not clearly expressed in scripture. There are several passages in which the term *expedient* is used in the King James Version, and translated as *helpful* or *profitable* in other translations. However, in most of those instances (John 11:50; 1 Corinthians 6:12; 2 Corinthians 8:10; 2 Corinthians 12:1) the word is not used in the same type of context as we are considering here. We are thinking about specific practices that would fall into the category of being *expedient* because they are the most useful ways of accomplishing a particular task. However, just as we have looked at the natural idea of communication, and noted that the principles for understanding God's communication are the same as understanding communication with one another, we can see that just as we naturally make choices to fulfill unspecified instructions in our natural world experience, we must do the same with fulfilling the instructions of God. When God gives us a task to do, but does not give specific instructions, we must make choices about how we are going to accomplish the given task.

It needs to be pointed out that the use of expedients do not authorize any particular task. Sometimes, men will argue that an expedient authorizes some activity, when in fact God has spoken to the issue in more specific detail. One cannot appeal to an expedient to authorize some activity that has not been authorized by God! In other words, expedients are only convenient methods of implementing the tasks that God has already authorized.

To illustrate this point, we will return to the example of music in worship. We have seen in previous lessons that God has been very specific about the type of music that He has authorized: singing and making melody in the heart (Ephesians 5:17-21; Colossians 3:16). One cannot come along and say that they have decided that it is more expedient to sing with an instrument. At that point, they have added to the instructions that have been given by God, and they are not doing just what God gave permission to do. A true expedient will accomplish only what God has authorized.

In the last lesson, we used the example of Noah building the ark to illustrate how God could be specific in some instructions, and yet be general with the giving of other instructions. Remember, Noah could only use Gopher wood because God specified the type of wood. He did not, however, specify where Noah was to get the wood, and how he was to transport it to the work site. Noah had been authorized to get the wood to the site. How else could he build the ark? But, because God had not specified how he was to get it there, Noah could choose the most *expedient* method. In our second example, David moving the ark of the covenant, we saw that God had dictated the method of moving the ark, and so David could not change it and be pleasing to God. David thought that he knew the most expedient way of moving the ark, and his error cost Uzzah his life! When God has specified some action, we cannot appeal to *expedient* to change it!

We make choices concerning what is expedient quite frequently. We can return to another example that we introduced in the last lesson: Jesus' instruction for the disciples to "go into all the world and preach the gospel..." (Mark 16:15-16). When one of those disciples chose to get on a boat, or to walk, or to ride a mule, they were choosing what was most expedient for them. They had to assess their own situation (where they were going, how long they would be traveling, etc...) to determine what mode of transportation would be best for their journey. Walking to Crete (an island nation) would certainly not be expedient! Evangelists today make the same type of decisions. One who is going from the United States to Africa certainly wouldn't walk, ride a bike, ride a horse, or

take a train. He might take a plane, or a boat. Most, of course, would determine that when taking into account expense, time of travel, and a schedule that needed to be kept, the most expedient solution would be to take an airplane.

Another good example of this concept is found in 1 Corinthians 16:3. After giving instructions for the taking up of a collection to help the needy saints in Judea, Paul wrote:

And when I come, whomever you approve by your letters I will send to bear your gift to Jerusalem. But if it is fitting that I go also, they will go with me (1 Corinthians 16:3–4).

Paul, as God's inspired spokesman, did not give specific instructions on who was to be given this task. He clearly left the decision, the judgment, up to the church in Corinth. They were to decide who would accompany Paul and deliver the funds. This is an example of an expedient. Whatever they found to be the most useful solution to this instruction would be implemented by the church in Corinth.

Who decides what is expedient?

Answering this question shows us the wisdom of God in establishing the autonomy of the local congregation. In the New Testament, we see that the local church is the highest organization of the Lord's body. There are no national, or international organizations for the local body to answer to. It has the responsibility of implementing the instructions that God has given for the work and worship of the church.

This principle is important because it shows us that the local church is responsible for establishing what is expedient for their circumstances. No two churches are exactly alike, and so what may be expedient for one congregation of God's people may not be expedient for another congregation. It is impossible for other congregations to have the information that they need to determine what is best for another congregation.

God expects that we will be concerned about the functioning of our own local congregation. The instructions that He provides points us to maintaining the purity of His body where we are members (Ephesians 5:22-33). Members of some other congregation (or the congregation as a whole) have no right to judge another congregation for their choices in the realm of expedients. They may not like the practices that another congregation implements to fulfill the instructions of the Lord in the local body, but such should not matter. Local churches should implement what they believe to be the best practices to fulfill their instructions, and it should not concern them what people in other congregations think of their decisions. If we cannot make decisions within the local congregation, without condemnation from other churches, then autonomy does not truly exist. Only the local body can determine what they believe to be expedient for their particular group!

Expedients in Action...

Earlier, we looked at some biblical examples of expedients. Those examples provide for us an understanding of how God did not provide specific instructions, and yet the men who received the instructions found a way to implement them. There are many things that fall into the same category in the work and worship of the church today. Local bodies must make decisions about what is the most expedient way to accomplish what we have been given to do. Lets begin with the worship of the local body.

Singing. As we have been using this as an example throughout our study, we will consider it once again. We know that we have been instructed to "sing and make melody" in our hearts "to the Lord" (Ephesians 5:17-21; Colossians 3:16) We also saw that we have a responsibility to do things

“decently and in order” (1 Corinthians 14:40). We are not told, however, on either account how to specifically do these things. That means that the local congregation can make decisions about what best suits their needs to be able to fulfill the instructions given. Different congregations may make different choices. Will they have songbooks? Will they use screen projections? When considering cost, size of congregation, and other congregation specific information, what is the best choice that they can make? As technology advances, some of these areas will offer more and more options. If we are not changing the activity (singing and making melody in our hearts) then we are free to choose what works best for a given congregation.

Time and location of worship. We are given both instruction and examples of the first century church meeting together. There are, in fact, several things (not the least of which is the Lord’s Supper) which are predicated on meeting together. For a group to meet together, they must know where and when they are going to get together. Consider that if you are to meet a friend for lunch, you must know where and when you will meet, else you will never find one another! However, the type of place nor the specific time are not identified in the New Testament for the meeting of the local body. Each local congregation must make a decision about what time is most convenient for the group. This is evident in a couple of New Testament passages. In Acts 20, though a specific time is not mentioned, it appears that the church was meeting later in the evening. This would not be an uncommon practice, as many would be required to work every day. They could assemble after they were off of work for the day. In Acts 5, however, it appears that the assembly probably took place earlier in the day. While we are having to make some assumptions (as the details are not given), it appears that Ananias and Sapphira came to give their money (1 Corinthians 16, on the first day of the week), sometime in the middle of the day. They were not together, but Sapphira came 3 hours after Ananias. It is possible that this took place prior to the assembly, rather than after it, and so they could have been planning to meet later in the evening as well. The group in Acts 5 did have a plan for the members to bring their contribution, as they knew where and when to take it to the apostles!

The time that is most effective for one congregation may not be effective at all for another congregation. While 10 AM may be beneficial to one group, another may decide it is more effective to meet at 2 PM. These individual congregations can also make the determination about how many assemblies they want to have on the first day of the week. We have made it a custom in the United States to have two assemblies, one in the morning and another in the evening. But, there is no indication in the scriptures that we must meet twice. We have freedom to choose to do so, meeting as often as we deem to be expedient, but those are choices for the local church to make!

These same principles apply to other meeting times throughout the week as well. We are given instructions on how to encourage and edify one another, and we accomplish that through assemblies and Bible study periods together. We are not given any specific day to do this, other than the assembly on the first day of the week in which the congregation is to partake of the Lord’s Supper together (1 Corinthians 11:17 ff). We can, therefore, choose when the best day and time is for the church to meet. For some, a midweek service is expedient, and they choose to meet on Wednesday evening (the traditional midweek day for the United States). However, some may determine that Tuesday, or maybe Thursday are a more convenient time. There is nothing in scripture that would dictate a particular day or time! We exercise the same type of judgment when we have evangelistic efforts like a gospel meeting. We determine when we think the best time for such events would be beneficial, and proceed with them. In these areas, there is no right or wrong choice. As long as we do not violate God’s specific instructions with our practices, we are able to implement our judgments as to what we believe to be best for the local congregation. Whether we meet at 8 AM on Sunday morning, or 8 PM on Sunday evening, we have fulfilled the instructions given by God to

meet upon the first day of the week. There are many choices that an individual congregation can make concerning the day (other than the first day of the week) and time of the assembled worship. Each local group must choose what is best for their members, to provide for their needs as a group.

The location of worship is also an area that a local group has much choice. In the New Testament, we see Christians worshipping in various places. Basically, anywhere they had room for their group was utilized by early Christians, including: outdoor venues, the Jewish synagogues, the Temple portico in Jerusalem, various houses, and rooms. This broad range of locations tells us that the location is not important. Christians can meet anywhere!

We are told that we are not to “forsake the assembling of yourselves together, as the manner of some is,” and we are shown first century Christians assembling together. This tells us that they had to have a place to assemble. You cannot assemble without a location to do so, and plans made for a time. Those things that are necessary to fulfill instructions given, but are not specified, are expedients. We can choose what is the most expedient meeting place for us. We must, however, make sure that we do not violate other instructions or principles that are given to us by God. We cannot, for example, decide that some sinful, ungodly place is the “best place for us to assemble.” We can choose to use facilities that are available to us, whether it be homes of the members, some outdoor venue, a rented room, or a purchased facility. What is most expedient for a particular group will be based upon its own needs. A group of 10 Christians should not find it expedient to build a brand new building that seats 200 people! They must evaluate their own circumstances, needs, and financial situation, and then make a decision about what is best for them.

This evaluation of a group’s particular needs is the key to understanding that only they can make the decision as to what is expedient. Other groups cannot know all of the details of the decision making process that an autonomous group goes through to determine what they will do.

Aids for teaching and worship. Paul spoke in Ephesians 4 about the process that God gave to the church to “edify the body.” But, how does that happen on a practical level? Paul’s letter emphasized the need for instruction, teaching how to grow to be more like Christ. How can we do that on a practical level? Can we have materials that aid us in such instruction? Can we have projectors that make it possible to show charts to explain scripture? Such are expedients, as God did not specify how to achieve this end. We are told what to teach, meaning we are to teach how to be more like Christ, but as far as what methods we must use, God has not specified.

We have used the example of singing quite extensively through these lessons. We have established the need for Christians to “speak to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in their hearts to the Lord” (from Ephesians 5:19). We also saw from 1 Corinthians 14 that we have an obligation to do “all things decently and in order.” How can we ensure that we are able to fulfill both of these instructions? God has not specified, which means He has left it up to us to decide what is most expedient for us. We can use song books, along with a song leader to direct the singing so that things remain orderly. We can use projected songs, placing the song in front of all of the assembly so that it is convenient to see and follow.

We cannot, however, make additions to the singing and claim them to be expedients. We cannot, for example, add in a piano, organ, or band, and think that we are fulfilling the instruction to “sing”. We have, in fact, added an element that changes the initial instructions.

Any time we use an aid to fulfill our given instructions, it is imperative that we examine the end practice and ensure that it is only that which we have been instructed to do. We may have more than one way to fulfill an instruction, but that does not change the instruction itself! If we are doing something other than the original instruction, then we have added to the instruction, not found an

aid to help us to fulfill it. When we use a song book to help keep order in the assembly, we are only singing in the end. If we add an instrument, we are singing and playing. That is not an aid, but rather an addition.

Misuse of expedients. There has been an effort throughout time to use the concept of expedients to authorize practices. As we addressed earlier, an expedient does not authorize anything. It fulfills the authorized instruction. An expedient doesn't make something lawful, it must be lawful first! There are many who use this idea to justify practices that are not lawful. For example, some say that the formation of a Missionary Society to preach the gospel is just an expedient. After all, God did not specify how we are to "go", so we have the freedom to provide for, and fund, the spreading of the gospel in any way that we see fit. The problem is, God has spoken about the manner in which the gospel was to be supported. Each local congregation determined to support men who were preaching the gospel. We see this most clearly with the apostle Paul. He had a close relationship with the Philippian brethren who were helping to support him financially in the work he was doing. Every example that we have in scripture indicates that there was no higher organization than the local church, who made these decisions, and provided as they could. It was a responsibility that was placed upon them directly, not something they could pass on through some extra-biblical organization or society. When we add something else into the equation, we not longer have an aid, but rather an addition. This same idea can be applied to such instruments as orphan's homes, hospitals and schools. God has given the care of such to individuals. Only in very limited cases has God authorized the church to provide some of these needs to those of their local number. To think that the church can join in cooperation with a group of churches to provide an extended organization to care for these issues is without scriptural foundation.

As we consider what is expedient, we must keep in mind this crucial point. Appealing to "expedient" does not authorize a practice. The general practice that an expedient implements must be authorized first. Otherwise, we are acting outside the realm of God's authority. Remember what Paul wrote:

And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him (Colossians 3:17).

Everything that we do must be done by the authority of Jesus. If we are operating outside of His authority, we are not serving Him, but serving our own desires. We can, when God has not specified a specific manner to fulfill His instructions, seek out the most expedient way. But, we must be very careful not to stray into unauthorized practices!

Questions...

1. Define *expedient*.
2. Provide two examples of expedients from the secular world.
3. Provide two examples of biblical men or women using expedients to fulfill the instructions that God provided to them.
4. Provide two examples of expedients that we use in the work and worship of the church today.
5. What limitations must be placed on the use of *expedients*?
6. Who gets to decide what is expedient for a local congregation? Why is this important?
7. How have some misused the idea of expedients to justify unauthorized practices?

Examples: When Do We Follow?

Perhaps one of the most disputed concepts of understanding God's revealed will for us comes in the form of how we interpret biblical examples. Of course, the Bible is full of examples, and we are left to determine whether we should follow the examples that are given, or consider them to be merely suggestions of how things might be done. Earlier in this study, we posed the question: "Is the Bible literal or figurative?" We pointed out that we cannot answer that question with a blanket response. Sometimes a passage speaks literally, while other times the author is conveying a figurative point. Only by considering the context may one discover whether a passage is to be taken literally or figuratively. Evaluating examples is much the same. We can ask the question: "Are we to follow biblical examples?" We cannot answer with a blanket statement. We must consider the context of the particular example and determine if we are to follow suit or not.

Examples are given for a reason...

Some have dismissed the idea of following examples completely, indicating that they do not believe that the examples given in the scriptures have any authoritative value. They are nothing more than good stories, or historical accounts of how those people did things. They have no bearing at all on how we are supposed to do things. The problem with this approach is that it indicates that God revealed information that was not designed to lead His people to "all righteousness."

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16–17).

If the scriptures are given to us so that we can use them "for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness," then all that is given serves to provide us with some avenue of growing to understand what God wants from us. In other words, God gave us these examples for a purpose! We cannot simply dismiss them, or ignore them. We must be willing to evaluate them, and figure out *why* God gave us the examples!

Examples comprise much of our instruction concerning the work and worship of the church, as well as how we are to conduct our daily lives as Christians. There are far more examples as to how we are to behave than there are direct instructions. Rather than simply giving lists comprised of "Thou Shalt" or "Thou Shalt Not" type of instructions, God has revealed His will through the examples of the apostles and the early church. As we read the book of Acts, for example, we see that Luke records what the apostles and early members of the first century church were doing, rather than the direct instructions. We can know what they were told to do by looking at what they were doing! The same principle is evident in the epistles, though we do see more direct instruction given there. However, even in those situations we do not receive direct instruction for us. We only read of the instruction given to those first century churches and brethren, and read about how they responded. In essence, they become our examples to follow.

Consider the first epistle to the Corinthians. Paul wrote giving specific instructions about how to deal with problems and issues that had arisen among them. We can look at the example of the Corinthian church, and learn how to make applications to similar (though not identical) problems

and issues in the local congregation today. So, while we may learn the direct lesson to “purge out the old leaven” from 1 Corinthians 5:7, it is the example expressed in that chapter that helps us to know what the instruction means.

As we have previously seen, nothing written in the scriptures was written directly to us. We are not the primary audience for any passage. We, therefore, learn from the example of those who were the primary audience. If we are to dismiss the whole of biblical example as lacking authoritative value, then we would have nothing left to the New Testament.

Apostolic Example...

We see throughout the New Testament specific instruction given to follow the example of the apostles. Consider Paul’s direct instructions to the Philippians:

Brethren, join in following my example, and note those who so walk, as you have us for a pattern (Philippians 3:17).

Paul called upon these brethren to follow the example that he was setting for them. They were also to follow the example of those who were following Paul’s example. This illustrates for us our responsibility when examining apostolic example. We follow the examples of those who were following the examples of the apostles. So, when we read about the first century church, who were instructed directly by the apostles, we know what we are supposed to be doing. We do what they did, as they were following the instruction and example of the apostles!

Paul later wrote the following to the Philippian brethren:

Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things. The things which you learned and received and heard and saw in me, these do, and the God of peace will be with you (Philippians 4:8–9).

Of course, this was not a principle that was reserved only for the brethren in Philippi. Paul would tell others the same thing:

Therefore I urge you, imitate me (1 Corinthians 4:16).

Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ (1 Corinthians 11:1).

For you yourselves know how you ought to follow us, for we were not disorderly among you; nor did we eat anyone’s bread free of charge, but worked with labor and toil night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, not because we do not have authority, but to make ourselves an example of how you should follow us (2 Thessalonians 3:7–9).

Paul, as he wrote to these congregations, told them to follow the example of the apostles. They needed to listen to the teachings, but they also needed to see what was being done and emulate it. The examples of those who were proclaiming the gospel to them were just as important, and just as authoritative as the direct instructions. They could not dismiss the examples that were given as unimportant. They were not to view those examples as optional. They did not view them as mere suggestions. They were told to follow the examples!

Notice that Paul, in 1 Corinthians 11:1, told the Corinthians to imitate him as he also imitated Christ. He instructed these brethren to follow his example, in which he was following the example of Christ! The example of Christ is certainly authoritative. We seek to emulate His example, which is what helps us to become more like Him. Consider one illustration of Jesus’ own instructions to

follow the example that He has left. In John 13, we have the account of Jesus washing the feet of the disciples. In that passage, Jesus took on the most demeaning of tasks, taking on the role of the lowest servant to provide a needed service to His disciples. After completing the task, Jesus said to the apostles:

For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you (John 13:15).

Jesus told the disciples that they needed to follow the example He had given to them! He was not giving them an option, or a suggestion. He told them directly that they were supposed to follow the example He gave them. Paul would then, at a later time, tell those he wrote to that they needed to follow the example of those who were following the example of Christ.

When we understand the progression of authority through examples, we must come to understand their importance. We cannot conclude that examples are unimportant, or even less important, than other instructions that have been given to us through God's written word. These examples have been given so that we can know what God expects of us. They relate information that shows us what is approved of by God!

Approved versus unapproved Examples

We do need to realize that there are both positive and negative examples that are present in the New Testament. When we are evaluating an example, there is a need to see whether the example recorded is something that God has approved of, or has disapproved of. Both serve a purpose, leading us to understand how God wants us to act. When we see an example that is not approved of, we know that we are not to put that into our own practices, but rather avoid it.

One example that was not approved of was the actions of Peter concerning the act of eating with the Gentiles.

Now when Peter had come to Antioch, I withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed; for before certain men came from James, he would eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision. And the rest of the Jews also played the hypocrite with him, so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy. But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter before them all, "If you, being a Jew, live in the manner of Gentiles and not as the Jews, why do you compel Gentiles to live as Jews? (Galatians 2:11–14)...

Peter was an apostle, and would certainly influence many with his example. However, on this occasion, he was not displaying the proper action. He was doing something contrary to the instruction of the Lord.

How can we know when an example is not approved of? There are two basic ways. The first is illustrated in the passage above. When something was done that was not approved of, the action was rebuked. We can know that we are not to follow the example of Peter, and those who were led astray by his poor example, because Paul rebuked the action.

The second way we can know a particular example is not approved of is if the action is refuted in some other passage of scripture. We may not have to be told immediately, in the context, that what was done was wrong, but we can know from our knowledge of scripture in general. For example, we know that Judas, after betraying the Lord, went out and hanged himself (Matthew 27:5). We do not suppose we are to follow this apostolic example, as it is clear that Judas' actions came at the end of a long string of bad choices, and sinful practices. We know the value that God places on life, and how that the practice of destroying one's own life stands contrary to the principles that

scripture teaches about preserving life.

These principles are illustrated quite clearly in Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians. In that epistle, Paul wrote to correct many things that were amiss in the local congregation. We, as we read that epistle, are introduced to the example of the Corinthian church. In many respects, their example was very poor, and we know that to be true because Paul's letter was intended to correct their poor behavior. Paul did not (with very few exceptions) indicate that their practices were correct, and needed to be followed by others.

We can contrast that letter with Luke's historical account of the early church in the book of Acts. Luke recorded the practices of the early churches as they were under the direction of the apostles. The information recorded there paints a vivid picture for us as to the functioning of the early church, without giving any kind of list for the individual activities. We can read about these early churches, and know how we are to act. If they were doing something, we know that God approved because they were acting under the direct instruction and example of the apostles. Unless we find something condemned, either directly or through other passages of scripture, we can know God approved.

Our View of Examples...

Sometimes we are asked the question: When is an example binding? The intent of this question seems to be to distinguish between examples we *have* to follow, as opposed to examples we *may* follow. There is no doubt that there are some examples that must be followed, and some which may be followed, but are not necessary to follow. We must be able to have a way to logically distinguish between the two. How do we know what must be done, as opposed to what may be done?

Let's first consider the approach that asks, "When is an example binding?" This question is perhaps approaching the whole principle of examples from the wrong standpoint. Rather than thinking of examples as being binding or non-binding, it is better to think of examples as being *freeing*. We have, in earlier lessons, shown that there is a need for us to have positive authority for our practices. We showed that we cannot act presumptuously, but rather must have God's approval for our actions. Implementing the teachings found in examples is no different. We do not act unless we have positive authority to do so. So, when we have a positive example, we have information on which to act. We can do nothing without that information, and the positive example frees us to do something.

Once we have an example, we know that we are free to practice whatever might be involved in that particular example. We are not, however, free to practice something else, that is outside of the approved of example. In such a case, we would be acting presumptuously, as we cannot show that God would approve of the practice outside of the example.

When we have multiple examples of how to do something, then we can know that God has approved of more than one way of accomplishing the task that He has given. The more examples that we have of a particular type of practice, the more freedom we have been given to fulfill the instruction. However, when there is only one example that is given, we have much less freedom. We are restrained by the example that has been provided to fulfill the practice just as the example has given.

Let's illustrate this distinction by looking at the example of the church in Troas in Acts chapter 20. Luke records that the church in Troas met "on the first day of the Week...to break bread" (Acts 20:7). This is the only occasion in all of the New Testament that gives the day that the church met together to partake of the Lord's Supper. We know, by having been given this example, that the first day of the week is approved of by God for the partaking of the Lord's Supper. We can therefore safely partake of the Lord's Supper on the first day of the week, and know that we are doing

something that God approves of. We cannot partake of the Lord's Supper on another day without acting presumptuously, because we do not have any example of the early church doing that. There is also no other information that would indicate that God would be pleased if we were partake of the Lord's Supper on another day. No one was told to do so, nor is God's approval implied anywhere. So we, if we are not going to act presumptuously, must choose to only replicate that which we know to be approved of by God.

The same principle can be seen in Paul's instructions concerning the contribution of the saints. In 1 Corinthians 16:1-2, Paul identified the day that this instruction was to be fulfilled; the first day of the week:

Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given orders to the churches of Galatia, so you must do also: On the first day of the week let each one of you lay something aside, storing up as he may prosper, that there be no collections when I come (1 Corinthians 16:1-2).

Here, Paul gave specific instructions to the church at Corinth concerning the collection of funds that they were to take up. When we couple this with Paul's earlier statements that he taught the same thing in all the churches, we conclude that the instructions given to the Corinthians in this specific case are intended for all Christians. They were taking a "collection for the saints" who were in need, and we can do the same thing, in the same way, even if the saints we are collecting for are not in Judea!

As we look at these examples, there are elements that are not so restrictive. In Acts 20, we are told that the group was meeting in an upper room. Is this a material fact (as is the fact that they were meeting on the first day of the week)? The answer to this question is a clear "No!" How can we know this? Because there are other instructions and examples that have an impact on our understanding! Consider, for example, that Jesus specifically taught that the location of worship would no longer be important in the new covenant:

The woman said to Him, "Sir, I perceive that You are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, and you Jews say that in Jerusalem is the place where one ought to worship." Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews. But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth" (John 4:19-24).

This idea is confirmed by the fact that we see examples of the early church meeting in many different locations throughout the New Testament. They met in outdoor venues (along the river bank), in the houses of brethren, in the portico of the Temple in Jerusalem, as well as other locations. We can, therefore, know that the location of the meeting place is of no consequence.

Material versus Incidental...

The distinction that is made between the information that is provided is that some of the information is material to the practice that is being taught, while other information is incidental to the instructions. Something that is incidental to a particular event means that it really has no bearing on the outcome. It is something that can be there, or not be there. The fact that the church met in an upper room in Troas is incidental to what they were doing. They could do all that they did in that upper room in any other location, and their actions would not be changed. The fact that they met in an upper room is no more significant to their obedience than the fact that Eutychus fell out of the window! Certainly no one would suppose to argue that because a man fell from a window in their assemblies, we *must* have someone fall out of a window in our assemblies!

Quite often, incidental facts are inserted by the inspired writer to help us to understand what happens in the accounting of the events. In this example, it is clear that Luke tells us that the group was meeting in an upper room so that we more fully understand the impact of the account of Eutychus falling from the window. Obviously, this would not have been so dire had they been in a first floor room. So, the location is not given as an example of what must be done, but rather so that we can understand the events as they unfold in Luke's historical account.

We can distinguish between material facts in the actions of the first century church, and the incidental facts by considering all the available information. We must be able to use not only the specific passages under consideration, but also the rest of the scriptures that apply the principle under consideration. For example, consider the practice of baptism. We have multiple examples of baptism that took place in the book of Acts. People were baptized in many different places. There are, with each of those examples, some things in common. The term "baptize" (in some form) is used, indicating, by definition, immersion. Every time a person was converted, they were baptized into Christ. So, when we read of a baptism in the Jordan River, we do not assume that baptism is only valid if performed in the Jordan River. Baptisms were performed in far too many other locations to think that the specific body of water was material to the practice of baptism.

We can also consider the specific example of Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch. Philip taught this man the gospel as they were traveling along the road, and by happenstance they passed a body of water large enough to perform the baptism:

Now as they went down the road, they came to some water. And the eunuch said, "See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?" Then Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." And he answered and said, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God." So he commanded the chariot to stand still. And both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him (Acts 8:36–38).

It is evident that the specific body of water was not of any importance. The act of baptism was important, and Luke provided enough detail for us to be able to see the baptism of this man through his description.

Some argue that we are just choosing what is material and what is incidental in an arbitrary way. We pick what we want to apply, and label the rest as incidental. This may appear to be true if we pick an example from scripture and try to discuss it completely removed from all the rest of scripture. But we cannot examine scripture in such a way. Considering all of what the scriptures have to say on a particular topic is the only way to determine what God's will on that topic is! So, determining that a particular fact that is given is only incidental to the passage is based upon a comparison with other information that impacts our judgment. If we determine that a particular fact is material to the practice we are examining, but it causes a contradiction with another passage, then we have clearly made a mistake.

To illustrate this, consider once again the fact that the church in Troas met in an upper room. If we determine that this fact is material to pleasing God in our assemblies, then when we see other examples, of other places that first century Christians worshiped, we have a problem. They either had to meet in an upper room as well, or their example is not approved. If their example is not approved (a premise for which we have not support) then everything they did in those assemblies would also be disapproved of by God. We would, in this case, lose almost every other example of the first century church assembling together in the first century!

Incidentals do not limit our practices. They simply provide for us factual information to help us to understand what is happening in a particular passage. Paul preached till midnight in Acts 20. This

fact is not provided so that we know we must preach till midnight on every first day of the week, but rather is given so that we have some context for Eutychus falling from the window. We do learn, from this particular example, that preaching in the assemblies is authorized by God!

Common Sense...

Sometimes we spend a lot of time and effort trying to figure out how to prove that we are to follow a particular example, or not follow it. While some examples may be more difficult to decipher, we can often know the answer simply by the common sense that God has given to us for reasoning. Let's return to the example of Judas, who hanged himself after betraying the Lord. Surely we can deduce that we are not to follow in his example! Do we really need a statement telling us to avoid this example? We can usually understand when we have been given a negative example, and know that we are not supposed to follow after it. Likewise, we do not need a statement of approval after every positive example that is provided for us in scripture. We can understand, through the reasoning abilities that God has given to us, that He has provided an example so that we can know what would be pleasing to Him. If His people did something in the first century and He was pleased with it, then we know we can do it now as well! So, while it is important to understand how we get to a valid conclusion with biblical examples, we should not disregard the common sense reasoning abilities that God has provided for us. We use them frequently when communicating in our every day life, and we should use them when studying the word of God! Think of a parent telling stories for their children. They don't have to declare, "I want you to do this..." Or "I'm telling you this so you won't do it yourself..." Usually, by the very nature of the account one can tell whether it is a positive example to be followed, or a negative example to be avoided. We can use the same rationale for evaluating the biblical examples!

Final thoughts...

As we close this lesson, keep in mind the premise that we established earlier in study. We should not be looking at examples, asking if they are *binding*. Rather, we should view examples as *freeing*. We have established through this study that we are supposed to be restrained, acting only when we have positive authority from God to do so.

And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him (Colossians 3:17).

The only way we can do something "in the name of the Lord Jesus", that is, by His authority, is for us to have been told, or shown, that it is pleasing to Him. So, as we consider examples that have been recorded for us in scripture, let us remember that we have been freed to operate in the ways that we see in those positive examples. We are restrained from operating in different ways than what God has revealed. We cannot go beyond, or act presumptuously and think that we are pleasing Him!

Questions...

1. Are we supposed to follow examples from the New Testament today? Why or why not?
2. What would happen to the impact of the New Testament text for us today if examples were not intended to be followed?
3. How did Paul emphasize the importance of the example of the apostles? What did he tell his audiences of the first century concerning examples?
4. How might we tell the difference between an approved example, and an unapproved example?
5. Give an example of an approved and an unapproved example from the New Testament.
6. How should we view the binding nature of examples? Why might it be better to consider examples freeing rather than binding?
7. What is the difference between a material fact in a given example and an incidental fact? Why is it important to be able to identify the difference?

Sitting Down to Study...

We have spent quite a bit of time and effort to establish principles of Bible study in general. We have talked about various aspects of how principles of communication and study in general should be applied to the scriptures, and how we can understand scripture in the same manner as we understand any other type of material. With this lesson, we want to consider various methods of Bible study in particular. When we sit down to study God's word, how do we approach it? There are several different types of Bible study, all of which are productive and beneficial in their own ways! We will take a look at each briefly, hoping to help us prepare for specific studies we might want to do.

Reading scripture...

The first aspect of study that we want to consider is the simple reading of the scriptures. This is the beginning of any study we might approach. However, we need to realize that just reading the scriptures is not studying it. Many have a daily Bible reading, which is quite beneficial. But, there is a difference between reading through material, and studying it to understand it, and to teach it to others. Frequently, reading schedules are extensive, covering a large section of scripture per day. For example, a schedule that is designed to have a person read through the whole Bible in one year will often have several chapters assigned per day, often with a selection of various sections of the scriptures (Old Testament, New Testament, Wisdom Literature, etc.). This type of approach is good, as it encourages the habit of spending some time in the scriptures every day. But, simply reading the scriptures, without trying to go deeper and understand them, only benefits us so much. We might know where a particular story, or account is found, and yet not know what God intends for us to learn from the account!

Reading scripture is only the first step in any real productive Bible study. We cannot possibly reason together about the scriptures if we have not read them! We cannot be obedient to God's instructions if we have never read His instructions. So, as we begin to discuss the various methods of approaching and studying the scriptures, we must recognize the need to spend time in reading those scriptures. Having a regular and structured reading plan can be very helpful in familiarizing ourselves with the scriptures, and preparing us for more substantial study.

Overview study...

The least in depth type of study can be described as an overview. In an overview type study, we are looking to understand the main points of the part of scripture we are considering. We might do an overview of the whole Bible, working to understand how everything in scripture fits together. Bob and Sandra Waldron have put together a very good overview study of the whole Bible. In that series of study books, they break all of scripture down into 17 points as a way to help the student remember the various time periods of the Bible. This type of study is very beneficial for gaining insight into the big picture of the Bible. It helps to explain how the accounts of the Old Testament fit together with the message of the gospels, or the epistles of the New Testament.

An overview study can also be accomplished on a smaller scale. Perhaps one would like to begin to have an understanding about why there are four gospels instead of just one. Rather than tackling each of the gospels in depth, he might approach the four gospels as a unit, reading them together

and focusing on what the various accounts have in common. Or perhaps another person might want to do an overview study of the Pauline epistles. Rather than trying to get every detail out of the various epistles, an overview might bring out similar themes between the various letters. One could learn a lot about the churches themselves, and some of the problems or issues that they were facing at the time Paul wrote to them.

Overviews serve an important role in the study of scripture. An overview study is deeper than simply reading the scriptures, but it is still done in a more cursory way than the other methods we are going to discuss. Its purpose is to help gain a general knowledge of the scriptures, and how larger principles fit together. Working on an overview study is good way to start a study into the Bible as a whole, or into a particular book of the Bible. You can spend some time familiarizing yourself with the broader picture, or message, and build a good foundation for deeper study.

Expository study...

Expository study is a method of study that delves into a particular passage to discover what is found therein. Some may identify this type of study as a *Book Study*, or a *Verse-by-Verse Study*. The idea is that you would pick a particular passage and study it in its context, working through it one verse at a time. This type of study can become very intense, as you might look at each word in each verse, and work to understand every aspect of the passage in question.

This type of study is also known as *inductive study*. Inductive study is a process using inductive reasoning when studying the scriptures. Inductive reasoning is the use of specific premise, that which is revealed in the passage, to make more general conclusions. We can read what is revealed, but we must draw conclusions on what that means for us. What is it that God wants us to put into practice?

Expository study can be quiet challenging. While seeking to dig every detail we can out of a particular passage, we may fall into the trap of missing the bigger picture. It is easy, for example, to forget the context of one of the epistles while trying to discern what a particular word or phrase might mean. It is important, no matter what type of study we are involved in, that we remember the context. One cannot gain the true meaning of the passage, without understanding it in the context in which it appears. If we assign some meaning that contradicts the context, then we clearly have missed the point that God intended for us to grasp.

An expository study might begin as an overview, looking at the whole of the book in consideration. What was the historical setting for the book? When was it written, and to whom? How might these details impact the our understanding of what is written by the author?

Then, we might begin to “drill down” into the passage further. What major themes might be present in the book we are considering? How might the book be broken up into different sections? What purpose might the author have for that breakdown? How does each section fit together with the one before it? Or the one after it? How do the chapter and verse breaks represent the translators view of changing topics? Do these breaks fit with what you see as the flow of the material revealed?

After having this type of grasp on the book being studied, we might begin to look at the individual chapters, breaking the book down into reasonable chunks. What is the message in the first chapter of the book? What points are introduced? How might these points impact or influence what will be said later?

The breakdown then continues to each verse. How does each verse communicate a message that

God intended for the initial audience to understand?

We might then break each verse down into words or phrases, trying to understand the meaning of each one. Here, we might have to look up the specific meanings of words through various tools (which we will discuss in more depth in the next lesson). We want to try and understand the meaning of these words and phrases in their original setting. Remember, words can change meaning, which means that we might not be able to simply use a 21st century definition of the word, and understand what the original author intended.

By systematically working through a given passage, we can dig into its meaning and mine out all of the information that God wanted us to gain from it. One can certainly see how this type of study can be much like peeling an onion. There are layers that we can work through, and we add more to our knowledge with each layer that we peel away. Each study is beneficial to us, as we learn more and more about God, and His will for us. Because of the layers, we can also have confidence that each time we return to a passage, we can and should learn something more. This provides opportunity for us to challenge ourselves, pushing ourselves to learn more about Him. We will never, if we maintain the proper attitude toward God's word, believe that we have learned all there is to learn. We will know that we can go back, and peel away another layer, digging ourselves deeper into God's word!

Sometimes this process of critically examining a passage in detail is referred to as *exegesis*. Exegesis simply means "critical explanation or interpretation of a text or portion of a text, especially of the Bible."¹ This is the process of taking out of the passage what God intended. We can contrast with the concept of eisegesis, which is "an interpretation, especially of Scripture, that expresses the interpreter's own ideas, bias, or the like, rather than the meaning of the text."² Our goal should always be to try and find the meaning that is in the text, not read in our own biases or desires into the text! We are to take the meaning out of scripture (exegesis), not try to put meaning into it (eisegesis)!

Expository study is the method that will allow us to gain the most depth, and understanding of particular passages of scripture. We can, through this method, break down a passage to its smallest parts, and come to understand it in the most detail!

Thematic study...

A thematic study is one in which we pick a topic that we want to learn more about, and then look throughout all of the scriptures to find what God has revealed on that topic. This type of study is known as a *deductive* (rather than inductive) study. Deductive study, based on deductive reasoning, starts with a general premise, and then turns to the scriptures to work toward the specific details. Through this process, we can learn a lot about different topics. So, whereas in an expository study, we might cover several topics in one passage, in a thematic study, we will study one topic across many passages. We want to learn all that God has said about a particular topic.

Character studies would be one type of thematic study. We might pick a particular Bible character, and then systematically work through all the passages in scripture that tells us something about that character. We could, for example, decide to study the life of King David. We would then piece together every passage that tells us something about him, or his actions. We might consider other men or women who come into the account of his life, and look at how they impact his account. We might break up the events of his life into good examples and bad examples. We might then discuss how the examples that are revealed are intended to be used by us, the lessons that we are sup-

¹ <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/exegesis>

² <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/eisegesis>

posed to take from the examples that are revealed. Through this process, not only would we learn factual information, such as the history of the time period, but we would also learn to what lessons, or applications, God would want us to take from the accounts revealed!

Thematic studies are very important to us when we are trying to understand just what God expects of us today. We cannot know all that God expects in any given area by simply studying one passage in detail. We must be able to look at all that He has recorded.

The sum of your word is truth, and every one of your righteous rules endures forever (Psalm 119:160, ESV).

The psalmist here relates the idea that it is the “sum” or “entirety” (NKJV) of God’s word that comprises truth. We must take all of what He has said, and put it together to understand His will for us.

One example of this type of study would be to consider God’s will for *salvation*. So our general premise would be *salvation*, and we would turn to the scriptures to find all that God has revealed on what we must do to be saved. Many people want to turn to John 3:16, and say that is the end of the study, the end of the discussion. However, we should do a deeper search, and look at other things that God has said are a part of salvation. If we stop at just the part we like, or want to believe, and look no further, we are not seeking the entirety of God’s will on the matter. We cannot ignore (or fail to look for) the other passages that tell us what actions are necessary for salvation. For our example, consider these:

For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death (2 Corinthians 7:10).

But what does it say? “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith which we preach): that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation (Romans 10:8–10).

There is also an antitype which now saves us—baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ... (1 Peter 3:21)

These passages illustrate for us that we must look throughout all of scripture to find God’s will for us on any given topic. We cannot stop with one passage, and think that is necessarily all that God has revealed.

These types of thematic studies can be difficult. Sometimes, we may overlook a passage that is quite important to understanding the topic we are considering. Sometimes, we may see similar words, or phrases in passages and think they are related, when in fact they are not. We must make sure when doing a topical study that we are actually considering those passages that address the topic we are focused on.

Mixed methods...

Sometimes, we might blend these various types of study. We might decide that while doing an expository study that it would be beneficial for us to branch off briefly and do a thematic study of some topic that we have found in our context. We might be doing a character study, and find a particular passage that we think would be beneficial to address in a more expository way, and so we spend more time looking at it in detail. Because all of these studies are greatly beneficial, it is easy to mix and match them to accomplish what is most beneficial to our learning! In the end, our goal should always be to seek out the will of God, and be confident that we are doing our best to serve

Him, based on what He has revealed to us!

Different circumstances will call for a different type of study. We should keep in mind the ultimate goal of our study:

For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness, righteousness, and truth), finding out what is acceptable to the Lord. (Ephesians 5:8–10)

Whatever methodology we use in our study, this should be our focus. We want to discover, through His revealed word, what is acceptable to Him, and then put it into practice! Learning simply for the sake of learning is not profitable to us spiritually. We want to figure out what it takes for us to be acceptable to the Lord!

May we show the diligence necessary to understand His word, and put it into practice!

Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15 KJV).

Questions...

1. How is reading scripture different than studying it?
2. What is an Overview Study? How might an Overview Study be conducted?
3. Describe a Verse-By-Verse Study. What steps might you go through with a particular passage with this type of study?
4. What is a Thematic, or Topical Study? How is this different than a Book or Verse-By-Verse Study?
5. How might you conduct a Topical Study?

Practice...

1. Choose a short passage of scripture and work through it as a Verse-By-Verse Study. Remember to start with the broader context and move to the more specific!
2. Choose a topic that you'd like to study, and use the procedures we have discussed to begin to examine all that the scriptures have to say on this topic.

Study Aids

With this lesson, we want to briefly discuss some of the multitude of study aids that are available to the Bible student. We must begin this part of our discussion with a stringent warning: When we talk about study aids, we are talking about helps that are composed by men, and therefore fallible. Most if not all of the study aids available (including this book) will have faults because men are fallible. Everything written by men must be examined closely to ensure that it is in fact reflective of what is taught in scripture. Even the apostle Paul went through this scrutiny:

Then the brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea. When they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews. These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so (Acts 17:10–11).

We should never simply take a man's word for what the scripture says (or means) without examining it closely. There is no man who has perfect knowledge, and therefore, we must be willing to check every word against what is revealed in the will of God.

Having said that, there are a great number of study aids that can help us to understand the meaning of the word of God. We want to consider several of these aids, and see how they can benefit us.

Group Studies

Perhaps this is not something many would consider as an “aid” to Bible study, but in fact it can be a valuable aid! When we study by ourselves, there is obviously great value. However, when we study with others, we can often see much more in the scriptures. Why is this? Probably because our minds all work a little differently. Experiences in our lives can make us think differently, and therefore see something a little differently in a given passage. It is not that the passage means something different for different people, but rather that we may be able to understand something more fully because of our experiences.

Group studies provide an opportunity for us to talk through what is in a passage with other people. It is not uncommon, for many people, to see something more clearly in a passage simply because they have talked about it. The process of communicating with others can make it much easier to understand difficult passages or teachings. This process is shown throughout the scriptures with the idea of *reasoning together*. Luke, throughout the book of Acts, writes about Paul going to various places and reasoning with the people. This reasoning process made it possible for those he studied with to understand the gospel message, and know what God expected of them. The same thing is true today. Whether we are studying with those who have not yet obeyed the Lord, or with those who are already Christians, the process of reasoning together provides an opportunity for all involved to come to a more full understanding of God's word. We help one another to learn, understand, and follow His will for us.

Group studies can take place in any number of settings, both formal and informal. It is beneficial to challenge one another to learn more, and grow in knowledge and understanding.

As iron sharpens iron, So a man sharpens the countenance of his friend (Proverbs 27:17).

Computer Software

We live in a truly amazing time for compiling information. We have the ability to sit at a computer and pull together an amazing amount of information in a short period of time. There are now many different Bible programs available to help in the study of God's word. In fact, many of the computer programs that are now available have most of the resources that we will discuss through the rest of this lesson. These resources, which used to have to be kept in physical books, are now easily searchable on a computer. This makes the information easily accessible for most people!

Bible software has been developed to be accessible to anyone with a computer. Some has been made free by the developers, while others can be quite expensive. Usually, the resources that are being made available determine the cost of the product. For a simple electronic Bible and a few beneficial resources, one can use something like e-Sword, or Olive Tree Software. These programs, available for both a computer and for mobile devices, provide access to various Bible translations, and some free resources. Programs like Logos Bible Software provide (at a price) a nearly unlimited number of resources, that are fully searchable, and can be linked across devices.

For those who are merely looking for an electronic Bible to keep on their tablets or phones, there are multiple applications available. YouVersion, and Logos both have multiple Bible versions available electronically, and allow you to make highlights and notes in the text, and save them across devices through an account. This is particularly useful if you use multiple devices, and want to have those notes available! You can also search in the application store for your device and find that many of the publishers for individual versions have developed their own applications for their translation. Most of these are free, and provide a great way to be able to read various translations without having to purchase a physical book.

Having these resources available with such easy access is truly a blessing to us today. We have the ability to conduct study, and gain information at a much quicker rate than any Bible students living in times before us. Surely, there will be even greater advancements in this technology, to make even more information available at a faster rate.

Concordance

One of the most useful tools in Bible study is the Concordance. A concordance will list words used in scripture, and cite all the references in which that word is used. This is helpful when trying to conduct a topical study, and you want to make sure that you find all of the verses that might impact your understanding of the topic.

One must be careful when using a concordance to compile information on a given topic. One problem that sometimes arises is that a person pulls every citation of a word used in scripture, and compiles them into a list, believing that every one is pertinent to the study. The problem often is that the word, though the same, may not mean the same thing in every passage. Without further study, it would also be impossible to see that different words in the original language may be translated by the same English word. One can easily draw a faulty conclusion concerning a particular passage or topic because they have not differentiated between the context of a word used.

This is one area that computer software has become invaluable. It is now quite easy to do a search in Bible software to find every time a word is used. The search can be expanded now to search for phrases, and some software even has the ability to include boolean search phrases. This helps when you cannot remember exactly how something is phrased in the passage you are looking for, and can include various options to help pinpoint the passage. This type of search would not be possible with a printed book!

Commentaries

Commentaries are books written by various men about books of the Bible, or topics found within the Bible. Commentaries usually take a verse-by-verse approach to studying the scriptures, with the author providing his understanding of each passage. Commentaries can provide some good information about the background of the book that is being studied, as well as some insight into the passages themselves. However, it is important to realize that commentaries are written by men (as are all of these resources). Commentaries especially must be used with great caution, as they often reflect a given theology, rather than a simple interpretation of what is in the scriptures themselves. In other words, many commentaries express a doctrine not found in the scriptures, but rather developed in a denomination. Bible students must always remember that men are indeed fallible, and that means their writings must be read with caution. They must be checked against the scriptures, to ensure that what they say are true. Those things that are not true must be filtered out! Many people have been led away from truth because they are unable to filter out the error from the truth in these books. The assumption is made that someone who has written a commentary must be an expert, and therefore must be right. This is simply not the case!

Having given the warning, there is much value that can come from commentaries. Often, information that would take (and has taken) a great amount of time to research and compile is summarized in a commentary. We can learn a lot about a place that is mentioned in the Bible, or the historical significance of a particular location, by reading the materials that have been compiled into the commentary. Often, the author of a commentary has already tackled difficult words or phrases in a context, and can provide definitions and nuances of words as used to help us to understand the passage.

For the discerning mind, commentaries can be a good way of seeing how others have misused or misunderstood a passage. One can read the writings of a person from a particular denominational background and see how they have looked at a passage, which may help us to understand how to approach someone of that type of belief, and show them the truth. Again, we must be careful not to be deceived by their false doctrines! Those who are not yet grounded in the truth should not be immersing themselves in these false doctrines, as they haven't yet gained the ability to discern between that which is truth, and that which is error! There are some commentaries that have been written by conservative Christians, and they can be the most beneficial, as the authors would take the same approach to scripture that we would. Even these (and even when we may know the men who wrote them) may have some doctrines in them that are not true to the scriptures. So, one must always be careful when using these resources!

Lexicons

Lexicons are books that help us to understand the original languages in the scriptures. They provide for us the word in the original language, usually some amount of information as to its etymology, and a definition of what that word meant when it was used. There are several good Lexicons available. Two that are quite popular are *the Enhanced Strong's Lexicon*, and *Thayer's Lexicon*. Most of the time, these resources will only provide the factual information, but occasionally they will insert their own opinions as to the doctrines involved with the words.

These resources are invaluable to the Bible student who has not learned the original languages. Much like having an English dictionary to look up words we do not understand, a lexicon provides opportunity for us to look up the meaning of words in their original context. This can give us great insight into the author's initial meaning. If we do not understand what the original author meant when he penned a passage, we cannot know what God expects us to learn (and apply) from that

passage.

We do need to realize that looking up words in a lexicon does not make us experts in the original language. Sometimes, a lexicon cannot even capture all of the nuance of a particular word in a particular passage. We may need to get some help from someone who has learned the language when we run into some difficulty, to help us to understand some of the finer points of a passage.

We do not want to leave the impression that one must be able to understand the original language of the scriptures to be able to understand God's will for us today. The Bible has been translated into many different languages, and the translators for the most part have done a very good job! Usually, only when dealing with very difficult passages, or digging very deeply into a passage of scripture, will one feel the need to turn to the original languages for answers.

Various Translations

As just mentioned, the scriptures have been translated into many different languages. As electronic Bibles become more readily available, translations into even obscure languages has become prevalent. Here in the United States, we have a wide variety of English translations. Of course, some of these translations are better than others. The way that a translations should be judged is by its accuracy to the original languages. The translators needed to have a philosophy of translation that kept them as close as possible to the words of the original text. Variations will occur, of course, in the process because the translators much choose what words in English most closely convey the words in the original. They will also have to alter sentence construction to reflect the language of today. This accounts for differences between various translations.

There are some very good translations available today. Those that are known for being very closely translated from the original text include: The New King James Version, the King James Version, the American Standard Version (1901), the New American Standard Version, and the English Standard Version. We are not trying to provide an exhaustive list, but these are a very good place to start! One must be careful when choosing a Bible translation to ensure that it is an accurate translation, and not some corruption, like a paraphrase, which conveys a man's interpretation of the scriptures rather than a true translation. The Message Bible is an example of this. According to *the American Bible Society*, there are approximately 900 different English Bible translations, whether complete or partial.¹

Study Bibles are a slight variance from the basic idea of translation. They are a mix of the Bible text and commentary in one book. The author will place short comments about various passages usually at the bottom of the page of scripture text. While this can be helpful on some occasions, I am not aware of any Study Bibles that have been authored by conservative Christians, and therefore they all have a denominational bent. They are, unfortunately, full of false doctrine, and information. While it is nice to have much of the background information, charts and maps that are found in many Study Bibles, one must be very cautious concerning the doctrines taught. It is not uncommon to find those that have purchased a Study Bible, and cannot distinguish between the actual text and the added commentary. "But, my Bible says that it means this!" There are Study Bibles available with nearly every English translation, and written with varying levels of details in the notes. These Bibles can be useful in understanding how people have come to some of the faulty conclusions they have, as they have explanations for difficult passages. While these can be valuable tools, these Bibles should not be the first choice of a Bible student for their own personal study. One should not use the thoughts and writings of others to formulate their first impressions and understandings of what the scriptures say! Study Bibles should be used like other resources in study, not a first take!

¹ <http://news.americanbible.org/article/number-of-english-translations-of-the-bible>

Bible Encyclopedia

Bible encyclopedias, much like their secular counter parts, provide factual information about different topics. Of course a Bible encyclopedia will focus its attention on biblical information. These encyclopedias can be great resources for background information, geographical information, and historical information. These books often have pictures of the places, or things that are discussed in the passage. Being able to see pictures of biblical locations helps to visualize what is being described in a passage.

Encyclopedias can also provide information about cultural aspects of the various places found in scripture. While this may not impact the understanding of the passage, it may help us to understand why some particular passage was being penned. For example, when Paul described the city of Athens as having been “given over to idols” (Acts 17:16), an encyclopedia can show us more information concerning that idolatry. We can learn quite a bit about the background of the city of Athens, the idols that were present there, and the corruption that was caused by it. So, while none of that is necessary for understanding what happened in this chapter, being able to see those influences at that time can help us to understand Paul’s mindset.

As with all of the other resources, warning is necessary to protect against the insertion of false doctrine into the factual information. Sometimes men insert their own doctrinal views into the facts!

Bible Dictionary

There are a couple of types of Bible dictionaries. The first is much of like what we think of with an English dictionary. The words used in the English translation are given, and then a definition of how that word was used when it was translated. This type of Bible dictionary may or may not have reference to the words in the original language. A good example of this type of dictionary is *the Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*. The greatest difference between this resource and the lexicons mentioned earlier is that there is far more commentary inserted into the definitions. The author did not simply provide the definition, but goes on to advise the reader on how to interpret those definitions. While there can be some benefit to this, one must be cautious not to think that this commentary is a part of defining the words under consideration!

The second type of Bible dictionary is quite similar to the Bible encyclopedia, only scaled down. There are not complete articles addressing the various topics, but rather only a brief description. *Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, *The New Bible Dictionary*, and *Easton’s Bible Dictionary* are examples of this type of dictionary. They will provide English references, and then a brief definition or article about the words. These resources will include places, names, words, and ideas. The articles provide commentary on the particular topic under consideration, and as such must be evaluated for accuracy and truthfulness against scripture!

Topical Books

Solomon wrote:

And further, my son, be admonished by these. Of making many books there is no end, and much study is wearisome to the flesh (Ecclesiastes 12:12).

Certainly, nothing has changed since Solomon penned that! Books have been written on every Bible topic, and some of them can be very useful to us. In fact, we can gather the writings of many authors on one topic and compare what they have to say to gain a better understanding of that topic. Of course, there will be much in these books that do not reflect the truth of scripture, and must be rejected! Each book must be read with a discerning mind, and be filtered through the screen of

truth.

Topical books can be found on every Bible subject one would want to study. These will follow the topical or thematic method of study we looked at in the last lesson, rather than the verse-by-verse approach (such as a commentary). Topics might include such things as the family, creation, examining denominations, avoiding sinful practices, character studies, and any number of other topics. One can even find study books (such as the one you are reading now) that are designed to help one study a particular topic with others.

Conclusion

We live in a time when study resources and helps are readily available. Good books and/or computer programs are available for reasonable cost. We can compile more information than we can possibly read or digest in a very short amount of time. Most of us have access to good libraries, which have more materials than anyone could read in a lifetime! All of this is a great blessing to us, if we have the ability to discern the truth in the materials. Far too many people have been led astray because they began to accept the teachings of the writings of men, rather than abiding only by the scriptures. When men write things that are in accordance with the scriptures, they can be helpful. When they write things that are contradictory to the scriptures, they lead men away from God. The danger is that their writings still sound like they teaching truth. These resources do not openly proclaim their divergence from truth, but rather present their corruption as truth!

So, as you use these materials produced by men, remember to search the scriptures daily to ensure that the things you read therein are so!

Questions...

1. How can group studies be particularly helpful in the growth of the individual?
2. What computer software do you use to help in your Bible studies? How does the advancement in technology improve Bible study?
3. What are some of the dangers associated with the various resources that are available to aid us in Bible study?
4. What is the difference between a Bible encyclopedia and a Bible dictionary?
5. What translations do you use for your typical Bible study? Why did you choose that translation?
6. In what ways could a Study Bible be a good aid? In what way might it be a poor aid?
7. What topical books have been beneficial to your study?

