

LESSON 1

BASIC PRINCIPLES OF INTERPRETATION

This lesson contains 10 basic principles or truths that will help you interpret the Bible properly. If you remember each of them as you study, you will make a good beginning in understanding what the Bible teaches. You will also avoid some of the errors which have led people to misunderstand what the Bible means or to misapply what it says.

10 PRINCIPLES

Principle 1. The Bible is Without Error and is Our Only Trustworthy Guide for Faith and Life.

Because the Bible is the inspired Word of God, it is without error. It is also the final authority for what we should believe and how we should live. Though we can learn many things from other books and teachers, there is no other teacher or book or writing which can ever take the place of the Bible.

“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.”

2 Timothy 3:16

“The Scripture cannot be broken.”

John 10:35

Principle 2. The Bible is Its Own Best Interpreter.

Since the Bible has only one primary Author (the Holy Spirit), each part of the Bible is consistent with every other part. We should therefore interpret every passage in the Bible in the light of other Biblical passages on the same subject. Though we can learn much about the Bible from studying other books and by listening to godly pastors and teachers, our best aid to understanding the Bible will always be the Bible itself.

“I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the law until everything is accomplished.”

Matthew 5:18

“Your Word is truth.”

John 17:17

Principle 3. The Entire Bible is Centered around Jesus Christ.

Though not every passage in the Bible refers to Jesus Christ directly, the entire Bible is centered around Him. The Old Testament foretells and foreshadows His coming in many different ways, and the New Testament tells us about His life, ministry and the church which He founded. Jesus Christ is the heart and center of the entire Bible.

“You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about Me.”

John 5:39

“Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, He [Jesus] explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning Himself.”

Luke 24:27

Principle 4. The Message of the Bible is Redemptive.

Though the Bible gives us helpful information on a variety of subjects, it is not written as a textbook on history or science or philosophy or psychology. Its purpose is to teach us about the God of creation and His saving work in history through Jesus Christ. By studying the Bible we may learn how to receive the gift of eternal life through faith in Jesus and how to live a life of gratitude and obedience to God for that gift.

“From infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.”

2 Timothy 3:15

“These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name.”

John 20:31

Principle 5. The Message of the Bible is Progressive.

Since the Bible was written over the course of several centuries, it represents a gradual unfolding of God’s message to us. Everything the Bible says from the very beginning is true, but God’s later revelation often provides additional information or new insights which go far beyond the truths revealed earlier. In the Old Testament, for example, we learn that God is willing to forgive the sins of those who sincerely repent and trust Him for forgiveness. In the New Testament we learn about the tremendous sacrifice God Himself made to make that forgiveness possible.

“In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days He has spoken to us by His Son [Jesus].”

Hebrews 1:1-2

“...the Gospel He [God] promised beforehand through His prophets in the Holy Scriptures...”

Romans 1:2

Principle 6. The Message of the Bible is Historical.

The Bible describes what really happened to real people who lived in real places at specific times in history. It is not a book of legends or myths or fairy tales. Much of the material is dated carefully and precisely. It is a sober historical account of what God did and will yet do to redeem the world and bring man back into fellowship with Himself.

“Not one word has failed of all the good promises He gave through his servant Moses.”

1 Kings 8:56

“Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants

of the word...I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning...so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.”

Luke 1:1-4

Principle 7. The Message of the Bible is Understandable.

The purpose of the Bible is to reveal, not to hide. One does not have to have an advanced degree or years of theological study in order to understand what the Bible is all about. Its highest wisdom and deepest truths can be learned and understood by the simplest believer who studies it prayerfully under the leading of the Holy Spirit.

“The unfolding of Your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple.”
Psalm 119:130

“But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit...will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I [Jesus] have said to you.”
John 14:26

Principle 8. Some Biblical Truths are Beyond Our Understanding.

Though we can readily understand all we need to know for salvation and holy living, there are some things in the Bible which we accept simply by faith. For example, we will never fully be able to understand everything the Bible reveals about God—His eternal being, His infinite love, His amazing grace, His perfect justice or His sovereign will. God’s ways will always be higher than our ways and His thoughts will be higher than our thoughts. We should never limit God or His ways to our own understanding.

“‘For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways,’ declares the Lord. ‘As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts.’”
Isaiah 55:8-9

“Oh the depth of the riches of the wisdom and the knowledge of God! How unsearchable His judgments and His paths beyond tracing out!”
Romans 11:33

Principle 9. The Message of the Bible is Life-Changing.

The Bible was not given primarily to inform us but to transform us. It was given as God’s perfect guideline for our lives—to help us know what to believe and how to live. If we learn many things about the Bible but are not changed by it, our study will do us very little good. We must study in order to learn and learn in order to live!

“If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge...but have not love, I am nothing.”
1 Corinthians 13:2

“Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know. But the man who loves God is known by God.”
1 Corinthians 8:1-3

Principle 10. The Message of the Bible is Personal.

Though the Bible reveals to us eternal truths about an infinite God and His work of creation and redemption, it also speaks to us personally. God is concerned not only about the nations of the world but also about every individual in the world. The Bible is God's message to YOU.

“God our Savior... wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.”
1 Timothy 2:3-4

“The Lord... is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.”
2 Peter 3:9

LESSON 1

Name _____

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QUESTIONS: BASIC PRINCIPLES OF INTERPRETATION

NOTE: Some of the questions in this lesson are based on the material presented in the Course Introduction. You may wish to review that information as you seek to answer these questions.

1. A. In what way is the Bible an “ordinary” book?

B. In what way is the Bible an “extraordinary” book?

C. Write out three Scripture passages that show that the Bible is an extraordinary book. Write out the passage and include the reference.

1.

2.

3.

2. A. How would you explain the difference between Bible *reading* and Bible *study*?

B. What does Acts 17:11 teach us about the Bereans?

C. Do you think most believers today follow the example of the Bereans? Please explain your answer.

3. As we seek to understand the Bible, what is the significance of each of the following Scriptures?

A. 1 Corinthians 2:14—

B. John 14:26—

C. Ephesians 4:11-14—

4. How would you respond to someone who says: “We have the Holy Spirit as our Teacher, so it’s totally unnecessary for us to have a study course on Hermeneutics or any other helps of any kind”?

5. Describe each of the following study aids that may help us in our understanding of the Bible.

A. Bible Concordance—

B. Bible Dictionary—

C. Bible Commentary—

D. Study Bible—

6. Define or describe the following words as they appear in the Bible.

A. Anoint—

B. Atonement—

C. Blasphemy—

D. Chief Priest—

E. Exile—

F. Gentile—

G. Messiah—

H. Promised Land—

I. Sovereignty—

J. Tithe—

7. Do you agree or disagree with the following statement? “It’s good to study other books besides the Bible, but the Bible is the final authority on what God wants us to know and how He wants us to live.” Give the reason for your answer.

8. Indicate which of the following statements are true and which are false. Circle T or F and give the reason for your answer.

A. The Bible is written in highly technical language so that it usually takes an expert to figure out what a passage means. T or F

Reason:

B. Since the Bible is such a large book, we may expect to find many inconsistencies and contradictions in it. T or F

Reason:

C. It is impossible to be saved without understanding everything in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. T or F

Reason:

D. Since the main purpose of the Bible is to teach us the way of salvation, the Bible is often inaccurate in matters of science and history. T or F

Reason:

9. A. What is meant by the saying “The Bible is its own best interpreter”?

B. Give an example where you interpret a more “difficult” passage in the Bible in the light of “simpler” or clearer passages.

10. A. How do you understand the following statement: “The Bible is without error”?

B. What do you do when you come across things in the Bible which seem to contain “errors” of one kind or another?

11. A. What does it mean that “The message of the Bible is progressive”?

B. Write out two New Testament passages (include the references) that support the idea that the message of the Bible is progressive.

1.

2.

C. Give three specific Scriptural examples of “progressive revelation.”

1.

2.

3.

12. How would you respond to the following statement: “The message of the Bible is partly historical but it also contains some myths and legends which we can no longer accept with our modern understanding”?

13. A. What does it mean that “The Bible is Christ-centered”?

B. Do you think the Old Testament is Christ-centered too? If you answer NO, indicate why. If you answer YES, give examples to prove your point.

14. According to Psalm 119, there are many spiritual benefits we can derive from reading and studying the Bible. Read the following verses and indicate the particular spiritual benefit mentioned in each verse.

A. Psalm 119:9—

B. Psalm 119:11—

C. Psalm 119:133—

D. Psalm 119:165—

E. Psalm 119:171—

15. The following rhymes are sometimes used to describe the relationship between the Old and the New Testaments. What do you think they mean?

A. “The New is in the Old concealed; the Old is by the New revealed.”

B. “The New is in the Old contained; the Old is by the New explained.”

16. In this lesson there are 10 Basic Principles of Interpretation. Each of the following statements VIOLATES one of those Principles. Write out which principle is violated by each statement. Follow the example.

Example: Statement: “The Bible has no more authority than any other book.”
Violates Principle 1: The Bible is Without Error and is our only Trustworthy Guide for Faith and Life.

A. Statement: “The Old Testament view of God is completely inconsistent with the New Testament view of God.”

Violates Principle _____ :

B. Statement: “It takes an expert to understand most things in the Bible.”

Violates Principle _____ :

C. Statement: “The primary purpose of the Bible is to give us basic insights into the subjects of morality and psychology.”

Violates Principle _____ :

D. Statement: “The Bible mixes myths and legends with history to give us an interesting view of the ancient world.”

Violates Principle _____ :

E. Statement: “The Bible deals with great and wonderful things that happened in the past but has little to do with our own personal situation today.”

Violates Principle _____ :

17. A. Would you agree or disagree with the following statement: “If a person is living close to God and walking in obedience, he will not find any passages in the Bible hard to understand”? Give the reason for your answer.

B. List some Scriptures (at least two) that support your position.

1.

2.

18. Principle 4 teaches that the Bible is not to be regarded as a textbook on history or science or psychology. Do you think this means that the Bible is of absolutely no value for understanding science or history or psychology? Please explain your answer, giving examples, if possible, to demonstrate your position.

19. A. Explain what is meant by the statement that “The Bible was not given primarily to inform us but to transform us.”

B. Write out two Scripture passages (include reference) that support the statement made in A above.

1.

2.

20. A. Explain what is meant by Principle 10: “The message of the Bible is personal.”

B. Write out two Scripture passages (include references) that teach that God does not want anyone to perish but rather that everyone will come to a knowledge of the truth.

1.

2.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. The Bible was written almost two thousand years ago. How can it still be a guide for our life today? Don't we need new answers for today's questions and new solutions for today's problems?

2. Would you agree or disagree with the following statement: "It is better to know a few things in the Bible and live according to what we know than to know everything in the Bible and not live by it"?

3. Psalm 119:105 says God's Word is a lamp to our feet and a light for our path. In what ways is the Bible a lamp to your feet and a light for *your* path?

4. Principle 8 teaches that there are some things in the Bible which are beyond our understanding.

A. Please give three examples of things in the Bible you cannot fully understand.

1.

2.

3.

B. Why do you think God has made these things known to us if we cannot fully understand them?

5. In Ecclesiastes 12:12 we read, “Of making many books there is no end, and much study wearies the body.” Do you think this saying is true also when it comes to Bible study? Please give the reason for your answer.