

How to Understand the Bible

Basic Presuppositions

***“All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.”
2 Timothy 3:16***

The Bible is the Word of God. The Bible claims conservatively at least 2,500 references to inspiration in the Old Testament alone. 2 Timothy 3:16, “*All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness,*” teaches that the Scriptures are out of the mouth of God, literally, “God-breathed.” This verse teaches that the Bible is profitable or advantageous for:

1. **Doctrine** – Doctrine is a codified set of beliefs or belief system.
2. **Reproof** – The Bible objectively gives instruction as to when and where one is wrong.
3. **Correction** – The Bible objectively gives instruction as to how and why to get right with God.
4. **Instruction in Righteousness** – The Bible gives instruction on how to live righteously and please God.

The Bible is complete in its revelation of God and its purpose, which is showing His plan of salvation in His Son, Jesus Christ. History is quite literally His Story! The Bible is not complete with every historical event of when God moved in human history or even in relation to the life and work of Jesus Christ (John 20:30-31; 21:25). It is without error in its original autographs. Only Scriptures are inspired – not Bible study notes and dictionaries, teachers or preachers.

Explanation of the Basic Presuppositions

Everyone has presuppositions when beginning a major study. These presuppositions should be the guiding principles that are considered when approaching a problem or a study such as a book of the Bible. The basic presupposition of this study is that the Bible is the verbally inspired word of God and that it is a perfect record of God’s truth. Furthermore the Holy Spirit of God so prepared the human authors, inspired their minds and superintended their writing, that what they wrote down in autographs (original writings) were, indeed, the very words of God.

The Scripture claims inspiration for itself hundreds of times throughout the Old and New Testaments. One such claim, and perhaps the clearest attestation of all, is found in 2 Timothy 3:16 where the Apostle Paul

writes, “*All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction and for instruction in righteousness.*” The Greek word used here to translate “*inspired*” is “*theopneustos*” which translated literally means, “*God-breathed.*” ‘Pneustos’ is derived from the Greek word ‘Pneuma’ meaning ‘Spirit’. The Apostle Peter tells us that “*...Prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.*” (2 Peter 1:21) The Holy Spirit so communicated to the human authors that they each one wrote down precisely the truth which God desired to be transmitted onto papyrus, parchment or vellum (sheepskin) to be a record of God’s ‘breathed-out’ truth.

The Apostle said that this God-breathed scripture was “profitable, advantageous, and helpful...”

Profitable is a rare word in the New Testament. It is only used three times; twice in Paul’s letters to Timothy, in 1 Tim. 4:8 and here in 2 Tim. 3:16. The only other citing of this word is in the other Pastoral Epistle of Titus 3:8. The etymology (root meaning) and the meaning derived from “usage” of the word is consistent with being useful, helpful or serviceable, hence coming to mean “profitable”. The Scriptures are not “relics” of the past to be considered just as ancient history, but on the contrary are relevant and up to date. The teachings of the Bible are as helpful and profitable in our postmodern era as they were the hour they were written; of course, the next question would be, “How are they useful, helpful or profitable?”

They are helpful for at least four things:

1. **The Scriptures are profitable for “*doctrine.*”** Doctrine is the translation of the Greek word “didaskalia”, which is from the family of words having at its root, “teaching”. This word, in the King James Version of the Bible, is translated “doctrine” 19 times in the following passages: Mt. 15:9; Mk. 7:7; Eph. 4:14; Col. 2:22; 1 Tim. 1:10; 4:1, 6, 13, 16; 5:17; 6:1, 3; 2 Tim. 3:10, 16; 4:3; Titus 1:9; 2:1, 7, 10. This is a word that refers to a “set of beliefs” or a “system of belief.” In modern parlance or language, this would be called a “belief system.” This word, along with its Greek counterpart “didache” used 29 times, speaks of a “set of teachings” upon which the Apostles and early believers based their lives and ministries. The “Scriptures” are therefore profitable as a belief system upon which any person can build their life.

The Bible is profitable for a belief system upon which one can build a life. A person can know that what the Bible says is true, because it is unlike any other ‘set of teachings.’ It is indeed the very words of God, and one can be assured the foundation stands sure, has stood the test of time and will stand the test of eternity.

2. **The Scriptures are profitable for “*reproof.*”** Reproof is a fancy way of saying “telling you when and where you are wrong.” God’s word will accurately and consistently tell anyone where they are wrong. This assumes, of course, absolute standards that are unchanging in relation to the mores of time and culture. God has set absolutes in the universe and in morality. God tells a person when they are wrong, and He does that without partiality. It doesn’t matter if one is poor or rich, black or white, old or young; the truth is immutable.

3. **The Scriptures are profitable for “correction.”** While reproof tells one plainly when and where they are wrong, it doesn’t answer the second part of the question, “How does one get right when they have done wrong or gone astray?” The Bible is profitable for this as well, which is why the term ‘correction’ is in the text. ‘Correction’ is how God shows one how and when to turn from a wayward path and get back on the right path, and it even shows what path one should take. “How does one get right with God?” The Scriptures point us in the way of faith that pleases God (Hebrews 11:6) and it is through the Word of God that faith comes (Romans 10:17). Daniel, the Old Testament prophet is a perfect example of how God usually works in the life of His people. Daniel being confronted with a choice that violated his conscience before God, while in captivity in Babylon, asked to be excused from eating “the King’s meat”; but instead be allowed to eat those things that were more in keeping with the Biblical diet of his faith in Yahweh God (Daniel 1:8-21). Daniel didn’t just say, “No” to some-thing, but also “Yes” to something. God often says, “No”, but when He does, He always points to a “better” way. The Bible is the only source for a ‘correct’ answer.

4. **The Scriptures are profitable for “instruction in righteousness.”** This is God’s way of showing how to walk with Him in obedience and fellowship. God wants each of His children to know Him and walk in His way, because His is the only *right* way. The Bible tells one how to do this. The more a believer studies God’s word, the Bible, the more he will know God, know where he goes astray, know how to get back on the right path and know how to stay on the right path. No one has ever consistently grown in their walk with God without walking in the Word of God. Being filled with the Word of God is likened to being filled with the Spirit of God (see Eph. 5:18-21 and compare with Col. 3:16-17). The two are inexorably linked.

2 Timothy 3:16-17 has primary reference to the Old Testament of course. However, we as “New Testament” believers should be just as assured of the Divine Inspiration of the New Testament. The Lord Jesus pre-authenticated the writing of the New Testament in many passages, nowhere more clearly stated than in John 14:25-26 where Jesus said, *“These things I have spoken to you while being present with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you”* (Emphasis author’s). The Apostle Peter enlightens us as to the view of the writings of the Apostle Paul, putting them on par with Old Testament Scriptures since he was not numbered with the original twelve disciples. Consider what the Apostle Peter wrote about the Apostle Paul’s writings, *“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 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 scripture.”* (2 Pet. 3:15-16; emphasis authors.)

Understanding the Bible as it is Written

1. **The Bible is a Jewish book – written to Jews, by Jews, primarily for Jews.**
2. **Every Bible writer from Moses to John assumed/believed that the people to whom they were writing understood the context, culture, language, customs, idioms and illustrations of that day.**
3. **The Bible is not complete in details.**

John 20:30-31, ³⁰ “And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in the book; ³¹ but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.”

John 21:24-25 “This is the disciple who testifies of these things and wrote these things; and we know that his testimony is true. ²⁵ And there are also many other things that Jesus did, which if they were written one by one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that would be written. Amen.”

4. **The Bible was not written as a movie script with editor’s notes.** For example, in reading the passage about the Passover meal in Matt. 26, only the briefest of details are given about the meal that night. If all these details had been included, it would have assisted readers *today* to understand more of what those events signified. (Additional explanation is included in a later section in this study.)

Before beginning any study, a student should understand the pedagogy of the instructor. Without equivocation, the writer of this material, Dr. Tony Crisp, believes the Bible is the Word of God and it is without error. All of it. However, most of the students working through this material, being Western in their thinking are for the most part ignorant of the Middle Eastern perspective and culture from which the Bible was written. Therefore, several things must be understood about the Bible before beginning this study.

The Bible is a Jewish book, it is written by Jews to Jews primarily for Jews.

If you do not understand this, you will never comprehend the Bible. You must keep that statement in the forefront of your thinking. The Bible is not a Western book. It is a Middle Eastern book and it is written with the idea of assumptions. The Bible is filled with assumptions. Understand, the Bible is the Word of God from Genesis to Revelation, but it is incomplete in details and filled with

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assumptions. In other words, every Bible writer from Moses (Genesis) to John (Revelation) assumed that the people to whom they were writing understood the language, culture, customs, idioms, geography and the history of the teaching up to that time. The writers assumed and believed that all their audience understood the language and understood the idioms. Idioms are an expression that is peculiar to a culture.

Familiar idioms of the Appalachian region such as, “You are looking at me like a calf looking at a new gate” or “You look like a deer in headlights” for the most part, don’t make sense to someone who has lived their entire life in, say, California. A normal part of their daily life won’t have included calves or deer. To them, the phrase, “You look perplexed” would be saying the same thing. When taking people to Israel from the US, generally the expression heard more than any other is “Ahh, now I understand it. Now that makes sense.” Why? Because the Bible is filled with the assumption that everybody knew the language being spoken, the idioms that were being used as well as the geography and the history.

For instance, the Sea of Galilee is a Western expression. Americans think of the Black Sea or the Dead Sea, but the Sea of Galilee is actually a freshwater lake. The word for sea in the Bible is the word Yam. It is the same word that is used for fresh water. It is the same word that is used for ocean. It is the same word that is used for lake. It is the same word that is used for a pond or a tank. No, the Jews call it *Kinneret* because the word *kinnor* is the word for harp. If you look from above from the southern Golan plateau you will see that the Sea of Galilee is literally a fresh water lake that is shaped like David’s ancient harp, therefore it is called the little harp – *Kinneret*. So, it is called the Sea of *Kinneret*, or the Lake of *Kinneret* or the Lake of Tiberius in some of the New Testament passages. Everyone knew that in the time the Bible was written, but because we are Western, we just take what the translators give us.

The points in this chapter, though simple, must be thoroughly understood, accepted and absorbed as you continue this study.

Guidelines for Reading and Understanding the Bible

These are some basic guidelines one should understand to correctly and consistently interpret the Scriptures. Five guidelines are listed here:

1. If the plain sense *makes sense* – let that be the sense lest it all becomes *nonsense*.

In the author’s earliest days of ministry, he served on staff with Dr. W.A. Criswell, Pastor of the First Baptist Church of Dallas, Texas. Dr. Criswell had authored a groundbreaking book entitled, “*Why I Preach That the Bible is Literally True*.” Because of the known association with the school that bore his name, this author was of-ten asked, “Do you believe the Bible is literally true?” To which he would reply, “Yes, but the Bible does not always speak literally!” This and many other questions like this over the years are what brought about his preparation of this material for you.

The basic understanding of any document or text must be based upon understanding the nature of the written material you are studying. Questions have to be asked, “Is this a simple narrative telling a story?” Or, “Is the material some kind of figurative language medium being used such as allegory, metaphor or other analogous types of speech?” This makes a difference in how the material or text is interpreted or understood. If you take what is clearly historical narrative and make that an allegory, then you have done great injustice to the text and will totally misunderstand the author’s meaning. If you are studying material that is written in some sort of analogy and make it literal you miss altogether what could be a window of understanding of the author’s intentions and what was meant to be conveyed in the text. Two illustrations from the Bible will help us bring home this first point, one reference from the Old Testament and one from the New Testament.

The first book of the Bible is Genesis. The book is a narrative, a historical record of the origins of the universe, earth and all created things. It tells of the beginnings of mankind, his fall and redemption and more. It could be called the foundational narrative of all creation. This narrative should be read with the first principle in mind, *“If the plain sense makes sense let that be the sense, lest it all becomes nonsense.”* As you read the text, the narrative says, *“In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.”* The plain sense of that text is that “God” indeed *“created the heaven and the earth.”* If the Bible says, “The evening and the morning were the first day...second day...third day...” Then for that to make any sense at all one must take the plain sense of the text. Why? Be-cause the text was written as a historical narrative. Adam and Eve were real people! There was a literal flood! Abraham was a real person! There were literally covenants made and promises given! However, the entire Bible is not historical narrative.

The Old and New Testaments are replete with instances in which the Bible is written in something different than historical narrative. In the Gospel of John, Jesus says, He is, *“the Bread of Life.”* Does this mean that Jesus is literal bread: two parts whole wheat flour, one-part milk, two tablespoons olive oil, egg optional? No, No! He is using a “figure of speech,” a literary device to communicate truth. He is using analogy, or another way of speaking, to illustrate a truth or connect a literal truth with a deeper or richer way of knowing that truth being illustrated. In this case Jesus was referencing the “Manna” in the desert, which the Israelites ate on their way to the Promised Land. He was taking a literal narrative and giving it richer meaning! As the manna in the wilderness was sufficient for the Israelites every need physically, so He is sufficient for them, obviously in a literal sense (the feeding of the multitudes), but more than that, He could satisfy the longing, gnawing hunger of their souls. It was a method of speaking. *If the plain sense makes sense, let that be the sense lest it all becomes nonsense.”*

2. Always interpret a passage within the context (Immediate, Book, Corpus, Testament, etc.).

A “text” is a “written account.” Context finds its root in the compound of the word “together” with the word meaning to “braid or weave.” The context of a text is everything that weaves its way in and around the primary text. What is “with” the text? When reading any passage either small or large one should always consider what is being said. To whom it is being said? Where is the location of the speaker and the recipient of the writing? Are there any special historical, geographical, linguistic or cultural assumptions

or predispositions? In the document being read one must determine what was said just before the passage and after the passage being examined. Is the passage an Old Testament or New Testament text? The entire Bible is inspired, but the entire Bible is not written to the same people in the same circumstances; while each passage is accurate, passages are different. For example without a contextual understanding of many of the Psalms, many would not make sense or one would lack the background to understand the depth of the text, i.e. Psalm 51, 32, 88. The “Valley of Dry Bones” should be understood within the historical setting of the Babylonian exile and the promise of ingathering from the nations to be planted back in the land never to be uprooted again. That passage without *context* becomes nothing more than an extended allegory for Gentile believers to use as an illustration for conversion to Christ and some spiritualized teaching about the church. While the passage may be illustrative of that reality, it is not the primary meaning of the passage.

In the New Testament, if one does not see that the Apostle Paul is writing to a local assembly about particular local assembly problems at Corinth, all sorts of fanciful interpretations may arise. If one doesn't understand the *context* that Paul was writing not to complement but condemn what was going on in the Church; one will surely *misinterpret* the book's message. If it is not taken into consideration the context of 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus as personal letters written to younger pastors about how to conduct themselves within the local assembly, the letters will not make sense. If the book of Revelation is not taken as it says it is as the capstone of God's prophetic revelation of coming events in history, then it will remain a veiled book instead of as it was destined to be an “unveiling” of future events.

3. Always interpret an unclear text/verse (one that could be interpreted more than one way) by a clear one (one that can only be interpreted one way).

The first question that has to be answered is, “What is meant by an *unclear* text/verse? There are many verses in the Bible that can legitimately, linguistically and grammatically be interpreted more than one way. A clear text/verse would be one that by all accounts can be interpreted only one way.

One notable passage in the book of Acts is a good example. At the close of the great Pentecostal message by the Apostle Peter those who heard the message were deeply convicted, “cut to the heart” and said to Peter and the rest of the Apostles, “*Men and brethren, what shall we do? Then Peter said to them “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins...”*” (Acts 2:37-38). What makes this an unclear verse is that baptism in this verse can either be part of what brings about “remission/forgiveness of sins” or the result of having your sins forgiven. This hinges on one word in the text, “*for*” in the Greek text, “*eis*” which can legitimately, linguistically and grammatically be interpreted more than one way. This is a small word but is the difference between the theological view of baptismal regeneration or through trusting in the Lord Jesus alone to save and bring about forgiveness in one's life.

The truth may be illustrated in two statements using the same preposition “for” and will mean two entirely different things. If one says, “I am going to the convenience store *for* bread” the person in effect is saying, “I am going to the convenience store *in order to get* bread.” In that statement, the purpose of going to the

store is “*in order to*” get something. However, using the same language, while at the same convenience store that same person “Gets gas *for* their car” the entire meaning of *for* changes. The person is in effect “Getting gas *because they have a car*; not in order to get one.” Applied to the text/verse Acts 2:38 Peter is saying one of two things: “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ *in order to receive* the remission of sins,” or, “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ *because you have received* the remission of sins.” The difference is one word, but it is the difference theologically between whether a person is saved through faith alone or through faith and water baptism. These two views are diametrically opposed to each other. The question is therefore, “How does one solve this dilemma?”

The question is answered with another question, “Is there any place where a similar question has been asked about a similar subject that can clearly be interpreted only one way? The answer is, “Yes!” The verse is in the same book - Acts 16:31, “*So they said, ‘Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household.’*”

The context is that Paul and Silas have been imprisoned for preaching the Gospel of Christ. After singing praises in the middle of the night and a great earthquake, the keeper of the prison came to Paul and Silas and asked the question, “*Sirs, what must I do to be saved?*” Sound familiar? This is the same question being asked about the same subject matter as in Acts 2:37-38. The answer was crystal clear, “*Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved...*” Salvation is here clearly granted because of belief and there is not one mention of baptism. This is a clear passage. There is only one way legitimately, linguistically and grammatically this verse can be interpreted. **Salvation is received by trusting Jesus alone!**

4. Always interpret an *experience* by the Word of God, not the Word of God by an *experience*.

Interpret your experiences by or in the light of the Word of God. Never interpret the Word of God by your experiences. For instance, the Bible says do not be unequally yoked together. That means in context of the passage (see Guideline number two), a believer shouldn’t marry an unbeliever. Why? Because a believer and an unbeliever are going in two different directions. A committed follower of Jesus should marry a follower of Jesus. Men and women will say, “I know what the Bible says, *but* I feel like God is telling me this. I feel like God spoke to me.” Simply put, God will never tell you to do anything that is contrary to the written Word of God. That is called confluency. He will ***never*** tell us to do anything that is contrary to the written Word of God. So, never interpret what you “feel” or what you “sense” or what your “leadings” subjectively are, apart from the objective truth of the Word of God; otherwise one can be misled. Anyone can be misled spiritually because there is more than one spirit that is trying to lead us!

5. The Bible is a spiritual book and can only be understood by a person who has the Holy Spirit living in their life (1 Corinthians 2:10-16).

The Holy Spirit is able to make plain what He authored in the books of the Bible (1 John 2:27). However, God may choose to use human teachers as well as teach and give aid in understanding (example Eph.4:11ff)

Ten Time Periods

1. The Primeval Period	(Creation – 2100 BC)	Genesis 1-11
2. The Patriarchal Period	(2100 – 1500 BC)	Genesis 12-50, Job
3. The Period of the Exodus	(1500 – 1406 BC)	Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy
4. The Period of the Conquest	(1406 – 1375 BC)	Joshua
5. The Period of the Judges	(1375 – 1051 BC)	Judges, Ruth
6. The Period of the United Kingdom	(1051 – 931 BC)	1 & 2 Samuel
7. The Period of the Divided Kingdom	(931 – 722 BC)	1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles
8. The Period of the Single Kingdom	(722 – 586 BC)	1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles
9. The Period of Babylonian Captivity	(586 – 535 BC)	1 & 2 Chronicles, Isaiah, Daniel, Ezekiel
10. The Period of Restoration	(539 – 400 BC)	2 Chronicles, Daniel, Haggai, Zechariah, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Malachi