



International Church  
of Grenoble

# Understanding the Bible

Look, Listen, Live

## Acknowledgements

We wish to acknowledge the following authors for their contribution in forming our thinking about Biblical interpretation: Gordon Fee, Douglas Stewart, Howard Hendricks and Bernard Ramm. The core ideas we have developed for this course are as a result of the assimilation of their work. We have endeavoured to give credit where it is due but because of our frequent reference to the authors over the years we may perchance have inadvertently let their words become our own words. Please forgive us if this is in fact the case, we will be happy to correct as needed. We highly recommend the books by these authors as listed in the recommended reading section.

We also wish to thank the many students who have studied the Bible with us through the years at Hatfield Training Centre. Your insightful questions and participation have also served to form our opinions and assist us in refining and developing this method.

We also wish to acknowledge the sacrifices our families have made when we have been busy 'worrying' on the text. Thank you.

Neil & Michael  
for the Hatfield Training Centre  
September 2008

I have found this resource compiled by the Hatfield Training Centre to be invaluable in my approach to reading and understanding the Bible. As we are not seminary students, I have not used their works in entirety and have made several adaptations to suit our context in the local church. Nevertheless, the structure, ideas and much of the language comes from the resource as developed by the Hatfield Training Centre and shared with permission.

Blaine Vorster  
International Church of Grenoble  
January 2021

## Introduction

Welcome on this exciting journey to *Understanding the Bible* better. In this study we aim to provide you with a better understanding of the bible as well as teach you a very practical method you can use to study the bible yourself.

We believe the bible is an absolute standard for our lives and that it is essential that we have an ability to handle the Word of God correctly. In this course we will teach you how to read the bible exegetically i.e. to seek first to understand the authors' intended meaning and thereafter apply that meaning to our lives.

We trust that you will develop a new passion for the scriptures in this time and also fall more in love with their Author as He reveals more of Himself and His Word to you.

### Different ways we use the Bible:

Christians tend to use the bible in a variety of different ways. The following table is a helpful summary:

	<b>Experiential</b>	<b>Exegetical</b>
	Devotional, Directional	Doctrinal
Meaning	Subjective/Personal, derived from situation	Authorial intent
Purpose	Personal truth, growth/conviction; guidance, confirmation	Absolute truth, principles
	Edifies; Effective	Enforces
Authority	Self (possibly others for a time)	Everyone (all people at all times)
Dangers	Subjectivity Damage	Legalism Damage

### Importance and Overview of the method

To effectively study the bible we do need a method. Using a systematic approach to studying any section of scripture enables us to see past our present personal preferences and to connect with the Word of God in a fresh and meaningful way.

The method we will be using in this study is known as the Inductive Method. This means that we endeavour to come to the scriptures without predetermined ideas (looking for proof for what we want to be true). We draw our conclusions from the text in its proper context.

#### The method has three steps:

1. Look

What do I notice in the text?

2. Listen

What did they hear?

3. Live

How do we live the text?

## **The Nature of the Bible**

The Bible is a record of God's communication to us. We need to understand some things about the nature of this communication.

### **The bible is not:**

- IT IS NOT a treatise of systematic theology or of thematic studies.
- IT IS NOT a collection of Chapters and verses.

The chapter and verse divisions are helpful to locate passages of Scripture, but do sometimes break the logical flow of thought in the text.

- IT IS NOT a book of magic spells.

### **The Bible is:**

- The Bible is a record of authoritative 'revelational' relationships.
- The Bible is a story (narrative).
  - ✓ We can be faithful to the intended meaning of the text
  - ✓ The story is open to improvisation (devotional reading)
  - ✓ Provides a framework for doctrinal development
- The Bible is like a library
  - ✓ One library with 66 books!
  - ✓ We need to learn to think BOOKS.
- Any bible you read today is already an interpretation.
- The bible is both human (historical particularity) and Divine (eternal significance).

## **Look – What do I notice in the text?**

Looking is the first step and foundation of all bible study. In the process of looking we focus on working with the text.

When we look we become like Bible detectives and we investigate the text.

Looking involves repeated reading of the text. The reading we are talking about is telescopic reading.

### What to look for

The following list is taken from Howard Hendricks's book *"Living by the Book"* (see bibliography) and is very helpful in indicating what we should be looking for.

1. Things that are emphasized.
2. Things that are repeated.
3. Things that are related.
4. Things that are alike.
5. Things that are unlike.
6. Things that are true to life.

### Some additional pointers

This list is designed to increase your 'looking' abilities.

1. Find **repeated words**.
2. Find **repeated ideas**, themes.
3. Ask "**who**" questions. Observe the main characters, people.
4. Observe **commands**: advice, promises, warnings, and predictions.
5. Observe **atmosphere**, moods, and emotions.
6. Observe **key words**. They may be key because they are repeated frequently or because their meaning is essential in understanding a passage.
7. List the **things you don't understand**: meanings of words, statements, theological concepts, etc.
8. Put in your own words the **main idea** of the paragraph.
9. Observe the **author's logic** in his argument.
10. What **type of literature** is this book, passage? Historical narrative, gospel, apocalyptic, epistle, poetry, prose, didactic, parable.
11. What **illustrations** are used? Are they illustrations from Scripture, everyday life situations, personal experiences, etc.?
12. Ask the "**when**" question. Note the time elements. Observe words that identify time sequences: before, after, during, while, then, until, when, etc.
13. Observe any **geographical locations** on a map.
14. Observe **conditional statements**: if...
15. Observe any **summary statements** which the author makes. Watch for words such as: therefore, so, finally, last of all.
16. Observe **progression**. Does the author move to a climax of ideas or emotion? Does he move from general to specific, from a question to the answer, from a statement to an illustration, from a teaching to an application, from a need to the remedy?
17. Observe the **beginning and the ending** of the book or passage.

18. Observe **contrasts**. Simple contrasts can be identified by the conjunction, “but”. However, look for broader contrasts, such as contrasting ideas, characters, events, concepts, and attitudes.
19. Observe **comparisons**. Comparisons are introduced by the words, “ like”, and “as”. Also note comparisons of ideas, characters, events, attitudes.
20. Observe **pronouns**: I, he, she, it, they, them, us, who, me, etc.
21. Observe **verb tenses**: past, present, or future.
22. Ask the “**what**” question. What events are taking place? What is the order of these events? What was said? Etc.
23. Observe **figures of speech**.
24. Observe **questions** that are asked and observe the answers.
25. Observe **rhetorical questions**. These are questions that stir up the reader’s thinking.
26. Ask the “**where**” question. Note the places.
27. Observe **emphatic statements**: truly, behold, indeed, I tell you, I Paul, verily, etc.
28. Observe any **lists**. Note the order in these lists. Is there a definite progression?
29. Observe **nouns**. Notice who is doing the acting.
30. Observe important **connectives** which reflect reasons, results, and conclusions, such as: therefore, yet, however, likewise, so then, nevertheless, etc.

**Examples:**

Things that are emphasized

- Ephesians 5: 21 – 33

Things that are repeated e.g. words

- Hebrews 11.

Things that are related e.g. General to specific

- Matthew 6: 1 – 18

Comparisons and contrasts

- Galatians 5: 19 – 26

**Study Exercise: 1**

1. Read the section at least 3 times.
2. Identify repeated words and phrases.

**Listen – What did they hear?**

The bible should not mean to us what it never meant to the author and original readers.

Exegesis is the task of finding out what God said then and there to them.

### **Keys to listening:**

1. Context - is that which 'surrounds' the text

Different kinds of context:

- Literary
- Historical
- Cultural
- Geographic
- Theological

2. Comparison - compare scripture with scripture

3. Continuity

- Identify the 'unit of thought'
- Summarise the main idea for each unit
- One can use charts or diagrams

4. Consultation

The important thing to remember with secondary sources is that they are exactly that **secondary**.

Examples of secondary sources:

- Concordance
- Bible dictionary
- Commentaries
- Original language tools

### **Modern translations and translation theory**

There are a number of factors that scholars need to consider when they approach the task of translating the bible. The first is the difference between the original language (Hebrew, Aramaic or Greek) and the receptor language (e.g. English). Languages differ with regard to the meanings associated with words, grammar and also idioms. Another factor that needs to be considered is historical distance between the time when the original was written and the present day. Words do change in meaning over time and so do customs and culture.

There are basically three theories of translation:

1. Literal:

In a Literal translation the translator tries to keep as close as possible to the original words and phrasing. Historical distance is kept intact on all points.

2. Free:

In a Free translation the translator attempts to translate ideas. This type of translation is sometimes also known as a paraphrase. Historical distance is eliminated.

3. Dynamic Equivalence

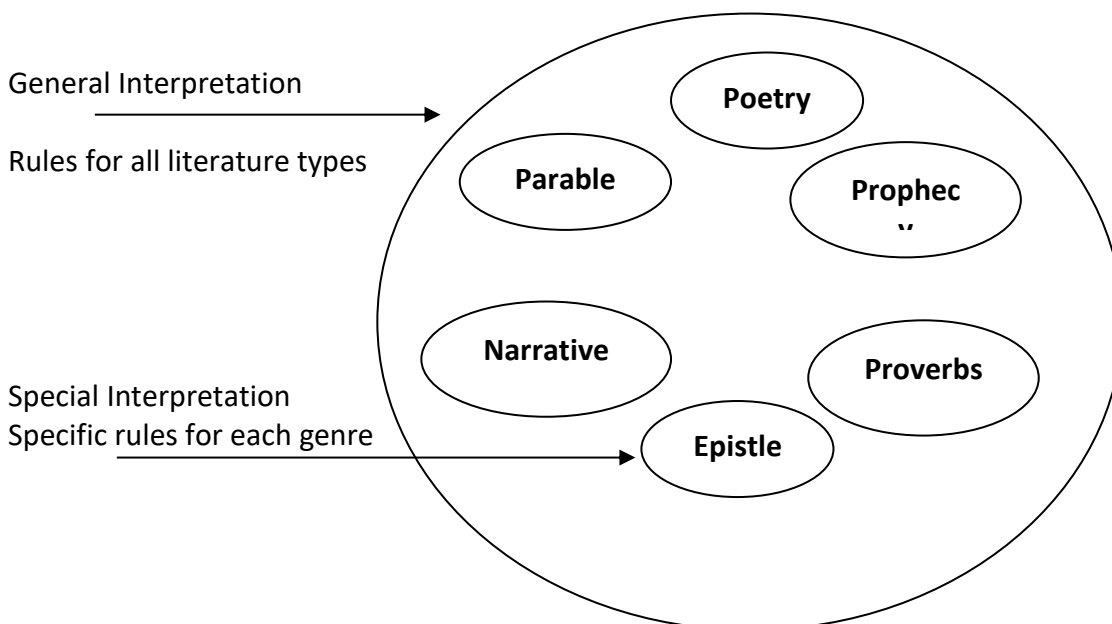
In a Dynamic equivalent translation the translator attempts to translate words and phrases into precise modern equivalents. Historical distance is kept on all historical facts but updates are made to grammar, language and style.

**Translations at a glance**

Literal		Dynamic equivalence			Free	
KJV	NKJB	NRSV	NIV	GNB	NLT	MSG
NASB	RSV		NirV	TNIV		
			NEB			

**Literary forms**

Another crucial aspect we must keep in mind when we listen is the type of literature we are dealing with. As God revealed Himself to us and as He interacted with the biblical authors, the revelations came in many different ways. Some authors expressed what they felt God was communicating in poetry, others in logical arguments, some told stories (narratives) of God’s saving acts. There are many different “styles” of writing in the bible - these are known as genre or literary forms.



**General guidelines**

We will first look at some guidelines that apply to the whole bible.



- The first rule to remember is that **“scripture interprets scripture”** – this means that the way you interpret a single passage must be consistent with the teaching of the Bible as a whole. If one passage in the Bible interprets another, we should hold to that interpretation.
- God has communicated with us in ways that we can understand (revelation is accommodated), many anthropomorphisms are used throughout the Bible.
- You will not properly understand a New Testament quote of the Old Testament without understanding the context of when it was originally recorded e.g. Habakkuk 2:4 and Rom 1:17.
- The revelation God gave is progressive. He did not lay out His whole plan of salvation in detail in Genesis but revealed more of it as time progressed.

### **Specific guidelines when interpreting Epistles (an example of special interpretation)**

**Definition: An epistle is a real 1<sup>st</sup> century letter.**

The epistles are the letters written mainly by the apostles to the early churches. Most of the New Testament letters follow the exact form of ancient letters.

Please keep the following in mind:

- The epistles are occasional documents. This means that some specific “occasion” caused them to be written e.g. a letter from a church, the visit of people from a church or questions that had been asked by a church to whom the apostle related. Some specific need brought about the letter. The key to understanding any epistle is knowing what the occasion was i.e. why was the letter written?
- Remember the basic rule “...a text cannot mean what it never could have meant to its author or his readers.”<sup>1</sup>
- “Whenever we share comparable particulars (i.e. similar specific life situations) with the first-century setting, God’s Word to us is the same as His Word to them.”<sup>2</sup>
- The theology we find in the epistles is task theology i.e. theology at the service of a particular need.

#### **Study Exercise: 2**

Trace Paul’s line of thought in an Epistle. We suggest you write a one sentence summary of the main idea of each paragraph.

#### **Live – How do we live the text?**

This is the goal of all Bible study i.e. we must live the text. It is essential to apply the text to our lives.

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<sup>1</sup> Fee & Stuart, How to Read the Bible for all its Worth, pg 60.

<sup>2</sup> Fee & Stuart, How to Read the Bible for all its Worth, pg 60.

The technical term for 'living the text' is hermeneutics, here we try to determine what the text means here and now to us. Please remember one never starts with the 'here and now'.

### Some pointers

- 'Worry on the Word'
- Wherever we have particulars and life settings that are similar to the 1<sup>st</sup> century, then God's word to them is God's word to us. We are looking for comparable particulars things in their culture and ours that are the same.
- The true meaning of the text is what God originally intended it to mean. "A text cannot mean what it never meant"<sup>3</sup>. This may not tell us what a text does mean but does help us with boundaries as to what it cannot mean.
- Use common sense. Some things obviously don't apply to us today e.g. Paul instructing Timothy to fetch his cloak and parchments (1 Tim 4:13). However, culture may affect what is common sense to you.

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<sup>3</sup> Fee & Stuart, How to Read the Bible for all its Worth, pg27



