

What is the Bible?

The word *Bible* means “book.” It is a library of 66 books, written over a period of 1,400 years. There were more than 40 authors over 40 generations, from all walks of life. It was written in three languages (Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek) on three continents (Africa, Asia and Europe) in a variety of locations and situations. The Bible is inspired by God, but written by humans. It is both human and divine. The copying and recopying of Bible books through the centuries is a witness to the guiding hand of God. Even the canonizing—setting the standards for what is Scripture—was inspired.

When we say *inspired*, we are saying the Scriptures are connected to God and have the power to bring about an encounter between God and the person reading the Scripture. When we read the Bible, God speaks to us.

The Bible contains many types of literature, including poetry, laws, history, liturgies, songs, prophecy, wise sayings, short stories, parables, Gospels, letters, sermons and apocalypses. Our reading needs to adjust to the type of literature before us.

How was the Bible put together?

The word *canon* means “rule” or “standard.” The biblical canon is the list of writings considered authoritative.

The Hebrew canon at first simply defined the first five books in the Old Testament, known to Jews as the Torah, Law, or Pentateuch. Torah was not only the central document of the Jewish faith but also the fundamental law of the Jewish people. The Torah was established in final form between 600 and 400 BC. By the first century AD (Jesus’ day) most Jews also accepted a second, less authoritative group of books called the Prophets. This included Joshua through Second Kings (excluding Ruth), plus the books of prophets. The third group of books in the Old Testament are known as the Writings. The Hebrew canon of Torah, Prophets and Writings was finalized around 90 AD.

The New Testament books were all written before the end of the first century (within about 60 years of Jesus’ ministry). The earliest of the books, such as James and some of Paul’s letters, were written within 20 years. Christians set aside specifically Christian writings, began to treat them as equal to the Hebrew Scriptures, and started reading them in worship starting around 100 AD. A New Testament canon developed gradually between 100 and 367 AD, when the first listing of books identical to our present New Testament was prepared by the church father Athanasius of Alexandria, Egypt.

The Bible has been handed down accurately through time

Sometimes people wonder whether the Bible has been handed down to us accurately. They worry that while it might have been God’s inspired word to begin with, perhaps over centuries of copying and recopying it has become full of errors.

It’s important to know the difference between *translation* (creating a new document in a new language) and *transmission* (copying a document word-for-word to make a second, identical document).

An ancient document can be translated into a thousand different languages, and as long as we keep going back to the oldest manuscripts for each new translation, the number of translations has no bearing on the accuracy of the version before us. Virtually every English language Bible today has been translated from ancient Greek and Hebrew manuscripts. Scholars who make new translations do not use more recent versions, and certainly don’t go to other translations as a source. Instead, they start with the oldest and most reliable manuscripts of the Old and New Testaments and then make their translation fresh from those sources, which are very close to the original writings.

The scribes who copied the Old Testament were trained professionals with stringent job performance standards. The Hebrew Masoretes devised a complicated system of safeguards against copying errors. They counted the number of times each letter of the alphabet occurred in each book, they pointed out the middle letter of the Pentateuch and the middle letter of the entire Hebrew Bible. They made up mnemonic devices to remember the various totals. If a manuscript was found to contain even one mistake, it was discarded and destroyed. The Dead Sea Scrolls are copies of Old Testament texts, found in 1947. They date from the century before the birth of Jesus. They have shown scholars that the Old Testament we have today is more than 95 percent the same as in that age, and that the 5 percent that is different is mainly slips of the pen and variations in spelling.

As for the New Testament, it was the most widely copied and circulated set of books in antiquity. Its accuracy is based on a multitude of manuscripts. There are more than 5,600 known Greek manuscripts and more than 25,000 manuscripts total. The document in second place, Homer’s *Iliad*, has only 643 surviving manuscripts. In addition, in no other case is the interval of time between the composition of the book and the date of the earliest existing manuscript so short as in the case of the New Testament. The books were written before 100 AD and the earliest copies we have are from about the year 400 AD. While 250–300 years may seem like a long time, it is nothing compared to the time elapsed between other ancient authors and the earliest surviving copies of their works, in most cases, more than 1,300 years.

The events in the Bible actually occurred in history. The people and places are real.

Unlike the sacred texts of other religions, which are based on myths, legends, or revelations given to a single person, the events in the Bible actually occurred in history over a period of more than 3,000 years. The people the Bible mentioned actually lived. People may argue about *who* Jesus is, but very few will claim that he never existed. Archaeologists continue to make new discoveries that verify the Bible’s accuracy, including, recently, 17,000 tablets in Syria that back up events in Abraham’s lifetime. You can visit many of the sites named in the Bible when you journey to the Middle East. Ancient texts outside Christianity and Judaism corroborate events in the Bible. While believing in *who* Jesus is does take faith, people are not asked to *blindly* put their faith in Christ. Evidence for *who* he is and what he did holds up to intellectual scrutiny, and the fact that the Bible depicts actual historical people and events is a big factor in having a defensible faith.

The Bible tells one big story: the truth about God and humanity

Even though the Bible contains 66 books, it tells one main story from beginning to end: the story of God and how he works through history. It begins with God the creator of all that is, God who existed before all things, is the cause of all things, who is above all things and is the goal of all things. The story continues with humanity as the crowning glory of God's work, made in his own image to be friends with him and dependent on him—but who chose to be independent from their Creator instead.

Humans then began to suffer the consequences of being separated from God. We lost his nature and character. We made up other gods and other priorities and worshipped them instead. We attributed all kinds of evil motives to God. Instead of treating ourselves and other people as God would—with kindness, love, mercy and justice, we became selfish, unforgiving and spiteful.

Because we could not find our way back to God, in his love, he made a way to us. Most of the Bible tells about the various ways God chose to restore his relationship with humans, and about our stubborn resistance to him. God came to Abraham and made a covenant to bless him, his future children, and all people. God gave us laws to help us live the right way. God rescued his people from slavery. God put up with his people as they rebelled against him in every generation. Like a good parent, he was patient beyond measure, but also corrected and punished them when they needed it.

Finally, God himself became human in the form of Jesus to live among us, teach us, show us what he is really like and finally, to die a gruesome death on our behalf to reunite us with him. He then defeated our enemy death, and promised that if we believe in Jesus and what he has done, we will be reunited with God and live forever in a perfect relationship with him.

The New Testament then gives us a brief history of the earliest people who believed in Jesus and tells us how they lived. It also gives us instructions and encouragement for how to live our lives as people who follow Jesus.

The Bible ends with reassurance that Jesus will come again, everything will be made right, perfect justice will reign, we will never experience sorrow or pain again, and nothing will ever defeat God.

God reveals himself to us in the Bible

You may have heard someone say, “The God I believe in would never...” or “My God is a God who...”

Many people have little or no interest in God because of what they imagine he is like. Some think he is like a kind grandfather who smiles and gives people gifts. Others see him as a strict, and sometimes cruel enforcer with a long list of rules. Or he is often seen as a repairman, whose job it is to come and fix problems when he is called on to help.

It does us no good to believe in God if what we believe about him does not correspond to reality! If our view of God is too far off, we will be worshiping someone that does not exist—a false god. Many contemporary religious cults have fallen into this trap.

When we read the Bible, we are freed from relying on what *we* think God might be like, or what our friends or relatives say about him. That is because in the Bible, we get God's own revelation of who he is. We learn about God's many qualities and attributes, which remain consistent from book to book in Scripture. We learn that God is for us, not against us. And we see that above all, God is merciful, faithful, just and righteous.

In the Bible God encounters and changes us

Scripture is one of the primary channels through which God encounters us and awakens us to the possibilities of a new way of being.

The Bible goes to our very center. It cuts through to the deepest part of us and touches the essence of what we are. We are totally vulnerable before God when we read the Bible—but amazingly, we find out that God is *for* us! God gives us Scripture for our healing, for our cleansing, for our wholeness, for our re-creation and for our transformation.

Scripture is the optimum record of the intrusion of the Word of God into human history. It records a sequence of events where God has broken into human lives. It is the picture of what happens when humans encounter God. It shows us how God penetrates lives and situations, discerns and reveals the truth of the human condition, and transforms flawed humans into wholeness.

As we read the Bible we receive a steady, consistent, daily nurturing of our lives that will increasingly shape us on the inside into the kind of person God wants us to become.

D:6 Scripture

How to choose and use a Bible

About Bible translations

A **word-for-word (literal) translation** attempts to keep as close as possible to the *exact words and phrases* of the original language, yet still make sense. A literal translation will keep historical distance (the difference between words, grammar, figures of speech, and culture) intact at all points.

A problem with this kind of translation is that it keeps distance in language and grammar. The translator often renders the Hebrew or Greek into English that is otherwise never written or spoken that way. This can often make the English sound ambiguous, when that was not the original intent.

However, a literal translation is often helpful as a second Bible. It will give you confidence as to what the original language actually looked like.

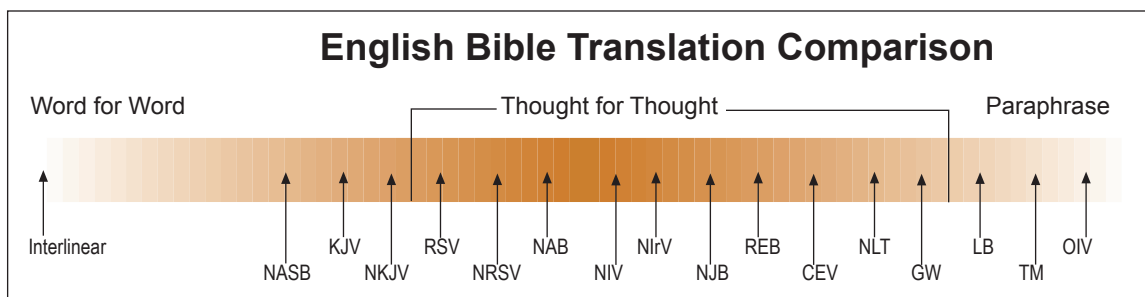
A **paraphrase (free translation)** attempts to translate *ideas* from one language to another, with less concern about using the exact words of the original. A paraphrase is difficult to use for Bible study because the translator tends to update the original author too much. Also, paraphrases often come close to being commen-

taries on Scripture rather than Scripture itself. A free translation is *always* done by a single translator, not a committee, and there is a danger that the reader will be misled. The original version of *The Living Bible* is well known for its many inaccuracies and rewritings, many of them to fit a specific theological viewpoint.

A free translation is usually very easy to read. It can be helpful to stimulate your thinking about the possible meaning of a text. It may also be good for those unfamiliar with the Bible to read quickly to get a scope of the biblical message.

A **thought-for-thought (dynamic equivalent) translation** is an attempt to translate the words, idioms and grammar of the

original language into their precise equivalents. Such a translation keeps historical distance on all historical and most



factual matters, but updates matters of language, grammar and style.

This translation theory provides a good middle ground between a literal and free translation. Bibles produced under this theory (see the chart) make good all-purpose Bibles for both reading and studying. A favorite of evangelical Christians is the *New International Version*, or *NIV*.

Useful features to look for

Maps will give you an idea of where things happened in the biblical stories. Many Bibles have built-in maps showing Abraham's journey, the events of the Exodus, what Israel looked like in the time of the patriarchs, the kings, and during Jesus' day, and where Paul went on his missionary journeys. Sometimes there are also maps of Jerusalem and other sites.

Bibles also may contain helpful **drawings and diagrams** of things like the Tabernacle and the objects in it, the Temple, coins, tools, clothing, and other artifacts from Bible times.

Charts can be very helpful for concisely ordering things like the events of the Bible, Jesus' parables and miracles, the kings of Israel and Judah, the covenants of the Old Testament, and so on.

Book introductions are found at the beginning of each book and tell you things like when the book was written, who wrote it (if that is known) what the title means, a background of the book, an outline, and its general theme and message.

Cross-references tell you where certain verses and concepts are mentioned elsewhere in the Bible. These can be in the center of each page or at the bottom.

Translation notes are usually marked in the text itself with a superscript letter; the note is at the bottom. Most often these notes alert you to a place where the translator had to make a

decision about the choice of a word and phrase. The note will often give you an alternate reading or a note about how the decision was made.

Study notes, found in study Bibles, are more lengthy notes that explain what is going on in the text. They might explain a custom of the time, indicate the current equivalence of a measurement or currency figure, note how the verse in question relates to another part of the Bible, or explain a geographical feature. In general, study notes help you to better understand the world of the Bible and help you relate to it.

Call-out boxes in the text bring your attention to something the Bible editor thinks is especially worthy of your attention. They are found in specialty Bibles and are geared to the theme of the Bible. In a life application Bible, call-out boxes show you different ways to apply the Scripture to your life. In a new believer's Bible, they point out basic features of the Christian faith, and so on.

A **concordance** is a list of common important words in the Bible and some of the key verses where they occur. You can use a concordance to find a particular verse if you remember one of the important words in it. You can also look up a word—say, "faith," and find the key places in the Bible where this word is used. Many Bibles have a brief concordance in the back. You can also purchase a separate "exhaustive" concordance for the translation you use most often. An exhaustive concordance lists

every instance in which a word is used—even common words like “he.”

A **subject index** helps you to find the places where important concepts are dealt with in the Bible. You would use this index if you wanted to know what the Bible has to say about “money” or “prayer” or “death,” for example.

Specialty Bibles

A **regular, “pew” Bible** consists of only the actual biblical text and the translation notes.

A **study Bible** includes most, if not all of the special features mentioned in the previous section. Other than the many helps to understanding what you read, it is usually a straightforward Bible with no other agenda.

The notes in a **life application Bible** show you how what you are reading should be considered in your life.

A **“tough questions” Bible** tries to anticipate and answer every typical question that occurs at tough points in Scripture. It is an attempt to help people who have very critical, analytical minds, and who are constantly wondering if one verse contradicts another, what a particular verse means, and so on.

A **devotional Bible** helps people to think deeply about the text and suggests topics for prayer and reflection.

A **children’s Bible** contains only the major Bible stories and is written in a style children can understand. It is not a translation or a real Bible, per se, but rather a collection of stories and characters from the Bible.

A **youth, or student Bible** is written for teens and young adults. It may be in one of the regular translations or in a simplified translation such as the NIV or the CEV. Call-outs in a youth Bible usually deal with things like sex, drugs, peer pressure, drinking, friendship, honesty and so on. Typically a student Bible tries to be “hip” in its packaging to appeal to youth—with varying degrees of success. Take a youth with you if you are buying one—they will let you know which ones are not too embarrassing to them!

The call-outs in a **small groups Bible** are a series of questions that allow a small group leader to build a session around any particular passage at a moment’s notice.

There are many kinds of **stage-of-life Bibles**. Into this category are Bibles for men, women, mothers, fathers, grandparents, people in recovery programs, older adults, young adults, people experiencing sickness or grief, and so on. The call-outs and packaging of these Bibles reflect their intended emphasis.

A **new believer’s Bible** contains call-outs and study notes designed especially to teach new believers about the basics of the Christian faith. These also are good Bibles for mature Christians who are discipling new believers because of their thoroughness in covering a wide spectrum of what a new believer needs to know.

A **parallel Bible** shows different translations side-by-side on the same page. It is good for comparing passages and concepts among different translations.

An **interlinear Bible** shows the original language on one line with the exact English word directly beneath it. They are hard to read for general purposes but of great value to pastors, students and those who need to know exactly what the Bible said in the original language.

Bibles beginners should avoid

In general, someone just beginning to read the Bible, or new to the Christian faith (or both) should avoid two categories of Bibles: those associated with a famous “brand-name” Christian, and those specifically written for adherents of particular branches of Christianity.

The study notes, call-out boxes and other commentary that is included in these kinds of Bibles will reflect the particular views of the person or the movement. A new Christian or person unfamiliar with the Bible may find it difficult to discern which helps or commentary are widely held views among Christians, and which reflect the distinctives (and sometimes idiosyncratic biases) of the person or movement.

Once one is more familiar with the Bible and is grounded in the faith, using this type of Bible should not pose as much of a problem. However, one should choose such a Bible carefully and with an informed understanding of the philosophy one is likely to encounter in the notes.

What is your need?

Why do you want to read the Bible? Your purpose will help you decide where to start reading and which types of habits you'll need to develop to keep going. Here are some common reasons why people begin reading the Bible.

- Some people want to find out what is in the Bible to help them determine whether or not to become a Christian.
- Others do not feel they have a grasp of the scope of the Bible, and want to understand how the Bible stories and passages they know fit together in the big picture.
- A new Christian will want to explore what the life they are beginning to lead in Christ is all about, what God expects of them, and what they can expect of him.
- Long-time Christians may be searching for new insights, fresh perspectives, or a rekindling of their love for Jesus.
- Someone going through a crisis needs to hear God's words of comfort, encouragement, forgiveness or mercy.
- Many people want to be able to store Scripture in their hearts for guidance and in times of need.

There are many other reasons to read the Bible. What is *your* current reason?

Tools that can help

Reading plans. *Discipleship Journal* makes available a free "one-year reading plan." This plan has you read from four separate places in Scripture every day. You can begin at any point of the year. Download it at <http://www.navpress.com/Magazines/DiscipleshipJournal/BibleReadingPlans/>.

A **One-Year Bible** is set up to help you keep on track as you read Scripture. How far you should read on any one day is marked right in the Bible.

Devotional books are helpful for people who want to combine reading Scripture with prayer and meditation. There are many different kinds of books on the market. If reading Scripture is your goal, you should steer clear of those that ask you to read only a verse or two a day.

"Five alive" is a strategy designed as a starting point for people who want to get an overview of the scope of the biblical message in a short time. Using this strategy, you read five books before any others: Genesis and Deuteronomy in the Old Testament, and John, Acts and Romans in the New Testament.

New Christian topics. A Bible designed for new Christians will list Scripture that covers basic concepts that all disciples should learn about. You could read the Bible to learn the basics of Christianity by covering the topics in turn. Or you could use the topical index or concordance at the back of a study Bible to do the same thing.

Some topics would be: God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, angels, demons, Satan, heaven, hell, love, forgiveness, purity, persever-

ance, honesty, integrity, faith, works, discernment, peace, joy, accountability, prayer, church, obedience, resisting temptation, sharing Christ, seeking God's will, what to do about money, courage in trials.

Reading Scripture as part of a **small group** provides you with encouragement and accountability, as well as interesting perspectives, fellowship and caring. Many of Cornerstone's life groups read the Bible as part of their session. Some are focused on Scripture.

Audio Bibles are available in tape, CD and MP3 format. You can listen to Scripture in your car, on your MP3 player while working out or gardening—wherever it works for you.

Sticking with it

- Remember that God wants above all to have a relationship with you. You should consider your time of reading and reflection to be one way you spend time with him, talk with him and let him talk with you. Be expectant at each meeting, looking forward to what you might learn or be told.
- Establish a routine that works for you. You may have to experiment with different ideas to see what works for you.
- Try to choose a time that will work for you most days. This is different for different people, and what works best may change over time. If it is at all possible, you should allow yourself at least a half hour to read and reflect.
- Try to choose a location that will work for you most days. It should be quiet, with few visual distractions, a place where you can go and not be reminded of things you need to be doing. Some people set up a special room or corner of a room in their homes with things that will draw them closer to God.
- If you miss a few days, just pick up where you left off—don't think you have to make everything up. The idea is to read, not to beat yourself up for not being more faithful.
- If you need to adjust the rate at which you read, do it! Perhaps you want to read more slowly to think more deeply about what you read. Or maybe you were too ambitious with your estimate of what you could do. It is better to read fewer verses than none at all!
- Pray before you read that the Holy Spirit will show you what he wants you to know, and that he will illumine your mind, change your heart, and move you to act on what you have read.
- Mark passages that have special meaning to you, that guide you or comfort you. You may also want to put a date next to what you mark, with a few words that will remind you why you found the passage especially meaningful.
- You might also want to use "notes" pages in your Bible to write in longer notes to yourself on things you found helpful.

The idea is to read, not to beat yourself up for not being more faithful.

The overall goal

The overall goal is a regular, careful, systematic examination of Scriptures with an alert mind and a prayerful, open heart, and with the intent to understand and live God's Word. Scripture is one of the Holy Spirit's primary tools for renovation of character and development of Christian conscience. We are changed from within as we learn God's will by his Word, and we choose it as our way by his grace and Spirit. Scripture is meant to be God's communication with you.

The first step in Bible study is prayer that the same Spirit who inspired the writers of Scripture may inspire and illuminate our minds as we study, and pray for a humble and teachable mind.

What am I trying to do?

Good students of the Bible:

- Learn by examining the Bible itself
- Look at individual books as units with something specific to say
- Understand that the structure of books and parts within books is a key to discovering their meaning
- Draw conclusions from what they specifically see in the text
- Make their own charts, lists and diagrams to help them understand what they read

Two questions, if you answer them thoroughly, will help you significantly. These two questions are: What did the authors intend to say to their first readers? and What does that have to do with us and our world?

What did the authors intend to say to their first readers?

helps us recognize that the Bible is *historical*. Bible books were written first to the readers of the time, with the Holy Spirit knowing that we would be reading over their shoulders. If we do not want to distort the biblical message, we must begin by asking what the author intended those first readers to understand, not what is being said to us. That comes later.

This question also reminds us that the Bible is *objective*. Scripture is not only something we study, it also speaks to the reader with the voice of the living God. The Bible stands independent of me. It remains God's Word whether or not I see it. It contains matters with which I must come to terms, which I neither created nor am free to modify.

This question also takes the Bible's *authority* seriously. The Christian disciple lives first under the lordship of Christ and his Word. This means that Christ and his Word are judge of all the earth, including our churches with our doctrines and practices, and our own selves with our backgrounds and preferences. If this is not true for us, claims about believing the Bible or using it as our standard do not stand up.

What does that have to do with us and our world? acknowledges that different Scripture passages affect contemporary Christians in different ways. It also notes that in most cases we do not fully understand Scripture until we act in response to what it is saying to us.

Seeing what is there

After we have opened with prayer, observation is our first step. We must see what is there and how it is put together. Here are some tips:

To get your feet wet, **start with a basic, small book**, such as Ruth, Jonah, Mark, Galatians or Colossians, or simply a section of a book. This way you can learn how to understand Scripture without getting overwhelmed.

Study in units. Units have significance, and everything inside the unit needs to be understood by how it relates to the overall picture. Use a Bible that is printed in paragraphs rather than one that sets each verse apart on its own. Give attention to individual verses only as you see them in light of the paragraph and chapter in which they are set.

Do an overview. Read the book or chapters you've chosen quickly to get an overview. Who are the major people, the places? What are the overall themes? Write these in a notebook. Read through again and give each section you come to a short descriptive title. This will give you the essence of the unit's content. Don't interpret yet—just write down what you are seeing. Note also how much space is given to each item.

What kind of **literature** is it? Decide whether the book is prose, poetry or both? Is it a history of events, prophecy, a song, a prayer, a letter, a legal code? These things will make a difference in how you interpret the materials.

Make a chart or list based on what you've seen, for your permanent use.

What is the structure? Biblical authors constructed their work in an intentional way. There is a design to each book that suits its purposes. Some things to look for—and make a written note of—are introductions, cause and effect relationships, events that lead to a climax of importance or intensity, comparing and contrasting things with each other, a plot twist, generalizing and particularizing, problems and solutions, recurring words and phrases used for emphasis, and so on. Don't stop looking until you think you see what the structure is.

The author's intention. As best we can, we need to try to understand the author's intentions for writing the book before moving to interpret or apply what we read. Even though some books are anonymous, like Hebrews, or written by multiple authors, like the Psalms, every text carries an intent that can be *inferred* at least in part from the writing. This intent directs us away from our own world and values to the world and ideas of the text. We should try as best we can to discover this intent—but we also allow the evidence to speak for itself and refrain from making firm conclusions when the evidence does not allow it.

Ask the text questions

Do not assume that you know what the text means, even with parts of the Bible with which you are familiar! One of the worst things you can do is to make up your own answers about a passage based on nothing but your own experience, someone else's opinion, what your church teaches, and so forth.

Here are the most important questions you can ask to sharpen your understanding of the depth and breadth of a passage, in the order in which you should ask them. Asking these kinds of questions will help you draw conclusions from the text itself:

- **Definitions.** Who or what is this, what does it mean, what is its significance?
- **Reasons.** Why is this so? What is the purpose?
- **Means.** How is this done?
- **Implications and assumptions.** What is implied or assumed?

Other guidelines

Historical setting. It is a constant temptation to forget that the cultural setting of the biblical writers differed significantly from ours. We think first of our own customs and assume those in the Bible were similar, when in fact, they usually were quite different! You can find general information about life during Bible times in Bible dictionaries and encyclopedias.

Choose the obvious over the hidden. It is much better to stay with the most obvious meaning of a text and reject hidden or subtle meanings. By the same token, if we see deliberate exaggerations and figures of speech in what we read, we should take them that way. In addition, we should not try to make the Bible answer technical questions it does not intend to answer in fields such as astronomy, physics or biology.

Context. What is the context in which things were written? By looking carefully at the immediate and the larger context, by studying the use of significant terms on our own and with the help of other resources, we can find answers to our questions.

Throw out your assumptions. Do not assume you will not be able to find answers to your questions because you are not a scholar, and do not assume you already understand Scripture and have all the answers. Either mistake is a tragedy!

Major in the majors

You should think about major matters first and details only as they relate to the whole. *Don't get bogged down in peripheral questions!* The author's main concerns should be your main concerns, so focus your questions first on the important questions, and pursue smaller details only as they relate to larger concerns.

Asking "why" also deserves a caution. This question often leads to undisciplined speculation that has no foundation in the text itself. Only ask "why" to seek answers in the text. The question must be answered on the basis of evidence. The reasons why certain things appear or why biblical people acted as they did will often be difficult or impossible to answer with certainty.

Being selective and wise

When we are looking to Scripture for advice in a specific situation, it is important to weigh the relevant passages and discern how they relate to the issue and to each other. This is a process of reflection that must precede applying Scripture to our lives. We must be selective in what passages we take as mandates for our own lives.

We must understand, for example, that Old Testament passages in particular often do not reflect God's last word on a subject. **Subsequent biblical revelation** may have refined, revised or even rescinded the instruction one is now studying.

At the same time, all scripture is relevant, and so we might look at something like the sacrifice laws in Leviticus as something that provides us with history, context and a theological basis for understanding what God has done through Christ.

We should also learn to **separate what is local, historical, and of limited significance from what is of universal, timeless significance.** If we look at the underlying issue the passage deals with, then look to similar passages elsewhere in Scripture, we can see how God instructed his people on this issue in different times of history. This will help us see God's underlying instructions.

It is also good to have an understanding of the most **foundational passages** in the Bible, such as Matthew 5–7, Romans 12–15, 1 Corinthians 13, Ephesians 4:1–16, Colossians 3, Philippians 2, and others. What God is saying in these places are his highest will for humanity.

The biblical 'preferences'

In the process of evaluating biblical passages, you should always:

- **Take the personal over the mechanical.** Choose authentic relationships with God and other people over relations governed by correct performance of certain acts.
- **Take liberty over legalism.** Choose the freedom to bring love and grace over the temptation to think salvation can be earned or godliness measured by strict adherence to God's law or teaching.
- **Take faith over works.** Establish unwavering trust in god and view good behavior as an expression of that trust.
- **Take holy love above all else.** It is the point of salvation. If someone interprets a biblical passage about holiness in a way that is not loving, it is not an adequate interpretation.

Let Jesus be the judge

As you decide whether your interpretation of a biblical passage should be applied to your life, evaluate it by the standard of Jesus' life and words. Jesus is the norm for life in the kingdom. *This is the most critical stance for evaluating what a passage means.*

Applying what you read to your life

The central concerns of a passage are usually where you will find the timeless message that you should apply to your life. This is rarely found in the smaller details. We should expect Scripture to both comfort and confront us, to affirm and rebuke us, to assure and unsettle us.

We should ask ourselves: what does this affirm for me? How is God's grace in my life confirmed here? What sins should I confess after reading this? What specific changes do I need to make in my life? What prayer should I pray for myself or others?

In some cases it may be impossible to understand a text as it should be grasped until you have begun applying it to your life. Allow the principles you see in Scripture to take form in the details of your life. They take on greater significance as you give consideration to the specific and concrete ways in which they will be lived out in us. This includes money, time and energy investments, the personal relationships in our lives, and our use of possessions.