

**GOING DEEPER IN THE ESSENTIALS
BIBLE STUDIES**

NAVIGATORS
— LEAD ON —

WHATEVER HE ASKS. WHEREVER HE LEADS.

GOING DEEPER IN THE ESSENTIALS

A solid foundation provides the support and shape for all that follows. God must be the focus of all that we do and so we want to expand and develop our understanding of who He is. We want to deepen our relationship with Him by growing our understanding of the Scriptures and prayer. We want to encounter God, to know Him not only to know about Him.

We must not assume or gloss over these essentials of the Christian faith, but keep them in focus and so we will look in some detail at God, the gospel, His word, and prayer.

STUDY 1 – GOD: WHO IS HE?

God is the ultimate reality! Building His Kingdom is entirely His idea, for His purpose, using His power and for His glory! Therefore, we MUST be aligned with His heart, His mind and His Spirit. That means having a God focused culture is essential. In this study we look at what the Bible says about God and discover that He is a Trinitarian God.

STUDY 2 - GOD: WHAT IS GOD LIKE?

In the second study we continue to focus on God. When we come to the character of God we realise that we cannot say everything the Bible teaches about God's character at once. We need some way to consider it in chunks and so we consider the attributes of God.

STUDY 3 – WHAT IS GOD LIKE (PART 2)?

This study follows on from study 2 in considering more attributes of God. We fall down at His feet and worship Him in awe and wonder: "God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see. To him be honor and might forever." (1 Timothy 6:15b, 16)

STUDY 4 - THE GOSPEL: GOD LOVES US

The gospel is bigger than narrow set of scripture that you have to believe to be saved. The gospel is the "A to Z" of the Christian faith, not just the "A, B, C". It is applicable to the unbeliever and the believer. It deals with the big issues of guilt, shame and fear that underlie different world views. It is bigger than individual salvation having implications for all of creation.



STUDY 5 – THE WORD: GOD TALKS TO US

God is a speaking God. Without Him speaking we would know little, if anything, of Him. We examine the implications of the fact that it is God who is speaking. Is all of Scripture God's word? Does the Bible have any mistakes in it? How was it decided which books were in the Bible and which were left out? What is the final authority in matters of faith? Do we have true copies of the original manuscripts?

STUDY 6 – THE WORD: INTERPRETATION AND APPLICATION

Every reader of a bible is involved in interpretation. In this study, we consider 11 principles of interpretation and then apply those to several different texts.

STUDY 7 – PRAYER: RELATING WITH GOD

In this study we consider from Scripture: what is prayer, why we pray, how to pray, what to pray and what hinders our prayer.



STUDY 1 – GOD: WHO IS HE?

INTRODUCTION

AW Tozer's opening line in his book "The Knowledge of the Holy" is so penetrating: "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us." Our view of God is more important than our view of ourselves, more important than what we think of our family, more important than what we think of politics, or world affairs, of what race we are, of what job we have, of whether we think we are good at this or that, of whether we have a soaring intellect or struggle to understand the family budget. God is the ultimate reality and all other thoughts are about something of lesser importance, they have a lesser effect on what happens to us for eternity. They have a lesser effect on what happens to others for eternity. God is the beginning and end of all reality.

It is therefore central, crucial, critical, imperative, whatever other adjective you can think of to make this stand out as important, to be God focused. Of course, we could not know God unless He revealed Himself to us. To get to know anyone, let alone God, they have to reveal themselves and God reveals Himself in many ways. The heavens declare His glory. People who know Him radiate His beauty and love as they live in vital touch with Him. He acts in time and history. But it is in the Scriptures where God has revealed Himself most fully and clearly. You see, despite the heavens declaring the glory of God (Psalm 19:1-6) humanity suppresses this truth that is plain (Romans 1:18-21). Moreover, it is the Scriptures that tell us about who Jesus is – without them we might know that a person called Jesus existed if we studied ancient history, but that would be about it. Further, we are told to test every spirit to see if it is from God (1 John 4:1) and the Scriptures will be the benchmark of the test.

The Scriptures explain the deeds that God has done and tell us about Jesus. They are perfect (Psalms 18:30; 19:7) and through them God speaks to us (Hebrews 4:12). It is the Scriptures that tell us about the attributes of God. Therefore, we must study the Scriptures, and study them thoroughly. It will not do to have a vague idea about who God is, based on a casual reading of Scripture. Nor will it do to have a view of God that we like, that takes certain aspects of God's character that we like, but downplays, or worse, ignores, other characteristics of God.

We must study the Scriptures to gain an accurate, if not a complete, knowledge of God. The whole of Scripture is where we get our understanding of God and in this study we are seeking to gain not merely a basic understanding of God, but to develop a closer relationship with Him as we get to know Him more and more.

As we lay this most critical foundation for all we do, we are seeking to avoid the error of so generalising the conception of God that our response becomes merely a warm feeling toward a fuzzy grandfather type figure, to a belief in the "great what you like". On the other hand, we are trying to avoid a forensic dissection of the character of God that pits bits of His character against other bits and detracts from the relationship.



GOD: WHO IS HE?

Getting to know someone takes time as they reveal more and more about themselves. It is the same with God. Throughout the Scriptures we see a progression of God revealing Himself, bit by bit, building on and interpreting the knowledge and experience of previous generations. The Trinitarian nature of God is like that. There are hints of God being more complex than a single person in the Old Testament, where for example God is spoken of in the plural (Genesis 1:26; 3:22; 11:7 and Isaiah 6:8). But it is in the New Testament that we see the plurality of God spoken of more clearly. This revelation of God as a trinity is so fundamental to who God is, it is so extraordinary, important, outside our experience and difficult to grasp that we will consider it first.

1. Choose a few of these verses. What do they tell you?

- Matthew 28:19
- John 14:26
- 2 Corinthians 13:14
- Titus 3:4-6
- 1 John 4:13-15

2. What do you conclude about the nature of God?

THE TRINITARIAN GOD

Let's look at each person of the Trinity.

3. What do you learn about the Father from these verses?

- Exodus 4:22
- Deuteronomy 32:6
- Isaiah 63:16, 64:8
- Jeremiah 3:19, 31:9
- John 6:27, 41; 8:41 and 20:17
- Galatians 4:4-6

4. The key question about Jesus, in a Trinitarian context, is “Is Jesus God?” Note what stands out to you in each of these sections.
- Direct statements: John 1:1, 14, 18; Romans 9:5; Titus 2: 13 and Hebrews 1:8.
 - Jesus claims to be God: John 8:58 compared with Exodus 3:14; John 5:17, 18, 23; John 10:30
 - Jesus does things only God can do: Mark 2:1-12; Matthew 25:31-34; John 20:26-29
5. What do you conclude about Jesus? Is He God?

There are two key questions about the Holy Spirit in this Trinitarian context. Is the Holy Spirit a person and if so is He God too?

6. What personal attributes does the Holy Spirit have?
- John 16:13
 - Romans 8:26
 - Acts 13:1-4
 - 1 Corinthians 2:10-11
 - Ephesians 4:30

Additionally, the word for spirit, **pneu/ma**, is grammatically neutral in the Greek and therefore the pronouns used with it should be neutral (“it” as opposed to “he” or “she”). Otherwise you sound like some foreigners who say things like – the car, him is bad or the bus stop, her has no parking.

Now in John 14-16 there are several occasions where John uses masculine pronouns, he, (**evkei/noj**) for the Holy Spirit. “But the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he (**evkei/noj**) will teach you all things” (14:26) instead of the grammatically correct “the Holy Spirit ... it will teach ...”. Or in 15:26 “the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, he (**evkei/noj**) will testify about me” instead of “the Spirit of



truth ... it will testify about me". Or again in 16:13,14 "But when he (**evkei/noj**), the Spirit of truth, comes, ... He (**evkei/noj**) will bring glory to me".

7. What attributes of God does the Holy Spirit have? What things does the Holy Spirit do that only God can do?

- Genesis 1:2; Job 33:4
- John 3:1-8
- Acts 5:1-9
- 1 Corinthians 6:19, 20
- 1 Corinthians 12:4-11
- 2 Peter 1:20, 21

8. What do you conclude about the Holy Spirit? Is the Holy Spirit an impersonal force or a male or female person? Is the Holy Spirit God? Why is this significant to you?

9. From what we have looked at, it could be possible to think that there are three Gods. Choose a few of these passages to see what the Bible clearly says about how many Gods there are:

- Deuteronomy 6:4
- Mark 12:29

Note many other passages say the same thing, such as John 5:44; 1 Corinthians 8:6; Ephesians 4:4-6.

DEEPENING YOUR UNDERSTANDING

Given that God reveals in the Scriptures that the Father is God, Jesus is God and the Holy Spirit is God, but there is only one God – we conclude that the one God is a Trinitarian God. Let's consider how the three persons of the Trinity are different and how they are unified. Think about the passages you have already considered and also read particularly the bolded passages. What similar roles do the Father, Son and Holy Spirit have and what attributes are unique to one or two of the persons of the Godhead?

- **Genesis 1:1, 2, 3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20** compared with **John 1:1-5, 18** and **Colossians 1:15-20**
- **Jeremiah 2:13, 17:13** compared with **John 7:38, 39**
- **Psalm 23:1; Isaiah 40:11** compared with **John 10:11, 27-30**
- **John 5:19-29; 10:38; 17:1-5, 10, 18, 21; Romans 8:9; 1 Peter 1:2**
- **Psalm 46:1; Isaiah 64:8; John 6:44; 15:1, 2; Ephesians 1:3-14; 2 Thessalonians 2:16**
- **2 Corinthians 5:21; Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:17,18; 4:15; 7:25; 1 Timothy 2:5; 1 Peter 3:18**
- **John 14:6, 26; 16:13-16; 1 Corinthians 2:12; Galatians 5:22, 23**

What are the implications of this?

SUMMARY

Theologians have traditionally thought of deity being defined as what is uncreated. Thus Father, Son, and Spirit are uncreated, this is what makes them God. Yet they are different and this is expressed as the Father being unbegotten, the Son being begotten and the Holy Spirit proceeding from the Father and the Son. The three persons of the Trinity are all made of the same "stuff": they have the same essence, they are all God; all one, at the same time. Yet there are three persons, not one, they are wholly equal in deity, honour, dignity and nature, and they are in perfect relationship.

It is worth noting that "person" is, however, an imperfect expression of the truth inasmuch as the term means to us a separate rational and moral individual, but in the being of God there are not three individuals rather personal self-distinctions within the one divine essence. Personality in humankind implies independence of will, actions and feelings that lead to behaviour peculiar to that person. This is not so in the Trinity. Each person is self-conscious and self-directing, yet never acting independently or in opposition. God is a threefold centre of life, but His life is not split into three. God is not a committee of three persons!

Father, Son and Holy Spirit are all equally God. However, they differ in how they relate to the world and to each other. They have different roles and functions. The Father is the initiator. He creates the plan, sends, directs and predestines. The Son implements the plan. He does the will of the Father, becomes flesh, and accomplishes redemption. The Holy Spirit administers the plan, convicting the world of sin, transforming the lives and hearts of believers, and empowering them, giving spiritual gifts and bringing glory to the Son.

Despite these differences, the life of the Trinity is characterised by mutual submission and complete sharing. There is a profound other-centeredness such that each divine person perfectly promotes the significance of the other persons. Within the social life of the trinity, one finds no jealousy, no complaining and no cross purposes. The Father glorifies the Son and the Son glorifies the Father. The Spirit brings glory to the Son.

God is a perfect, dynamic union of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit without any merging, combining or mixing up, yet without separation from one another. There is a mutual indwelling and interpenetrating of the three divine persons. The three persons of the Godhead are who they are in relation with one another and so the single being of God is a God who is one, an indivisible, unchangeable relational God. We must recognise their particular roles, but not separate or place a different emphasis on any one of Godhead that the Bible does not do.



APPLICATION

10. What implications are there about God being a relational being, and humans being made in God's image, for relationship with God and with one another?

11. What does it mean to you to have a heavenly Father who loves you perfectly?

12. Review John 14:23; 1 Corinthians 6:19; Romans 8:10. Who is living in you? What are the implications of this? How does this make you feel? How would the truth from these verses and what you have learned in this section help you address feelings that God is distant or impersonal?



13. How would you explain to a non-believer who God is? What Scriptures would you use?

14. How would you respond to a Muslim who said Jesus was a just a prophet, to a Mormon or Jehovah Witness who said that Jesus is not God?



STUDY 2 – WHAT IS GOD LIKE?

THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD¹

When we speak of the attributes of God we are referring to those qualities of God which constitute what He is like. They are the characteristics of His nature. They are qualities of the entire Godhead and are intrinsic to His very being.

When Scripture speaks about God's attributes it never says one is more important than another. Every attribute is completely true of God and true of all of His character at all times. He is entirely loving, entirely merciful, entirely just, entirely holy, entirely truthful and so on all at once. Consequently, we can say that every attribute of God also qualifies every other attribute. So, God's love and mercy are qualified by His wrath and justice and vice versa. In fact, because the Scriptures tell us that God is love *and* that God is wrathful, godly love must include an aspect of wrath.

Of course the division into the categories below is just an attempt to present the biblical material in an effective manner and it would be easy, and no less correct, to arrange them differently. There is so much about God that even though we will have another study about His attributes, it still, of course, only represents a small part of what the Bible reveals about Him.

THE GOD WHO REVEALS HIMSELF

To get to know anyone they have to reveal themselves to you. They must tell you where they were born, what they like to do, what is important to them and so on. You can also deduce something about them by observing what they do, but that too needs interpretation. For example, why is a person crying? Hurt, upset, extremely happy?

It is the same with God, but even more so as we cannot see God. We find out about God because He is a God who reveals Himself. Let's see how God reveals Himself.

1. Read at least the bolded references and note down what stands out to you about God revealing Himself:
 - Deuteronomy 4:9-12
 - Psalm 12:6, 7
 - Psalm 19:1-11
 - Psalm 18:30 and Proverbs 30:5

¹ While I have drawn from a number of sources for this study, a key source has been Wayne Grudem's Systematic Theology.



- Psalm 119: 72, 89, 105, 160
- Isaiah 40:8
- John 1:1-5, 14, 18
- John 14:9
- Romans 1:18-23
- 2 Timothy 3:16
- Hebrews 1:1, 2
- Hebrews 4:12
- 2 Peter 1:20, 21

2. What different ways does God reveal Himself?

3. Rate the clarity of each way on a scale of 1 to 5.

4. What does this tell you about the importance of Scripture?

Summary

God reveals Himself in several ways. The universe and the natural world declare His glory, but we suppress what can be clearly known about God from this. The Bible tells us about God. It interprets the events of history for us and tells us about Jesus who is the perfect image of the unseen God. Without the Bible we would not know that God was a Trinitarian God. Without the Bible we would not know the gospel. Even though God has done and could still reveal Himself through dreams and visions, through disembodied hands appearing and writing on the wall, through donkey's speaking He does not do that for at least the vast majority today. What He has done is give us His perfect word, the Bible, and that word is foundational as Ephesians 2:20 says.² Indeed, we have been working on this fact from the start of the first study.

THE GREATNESS AND MAJESTY OF GOD

The greatness and majesty of God is an attempt to describe the extent and magnitude of who God is.

5. Pick a number of the following passages and note down what stands out to you about God's greatness and majesty:
 - 1 Chronicles 29:11-13
 - Isaiah 40:12-26
 - Psalm 2:2-4
 - Psalm 145:1-6
 - Ephesians 1:20-23
 - 1 Timothy 6:15-16
 - Hebrews 1:10-12
 - Revelation 1:8; 4:1-11

Summary

God is all powerful, almighty, everlasting, King of kings and Lord of lords who we adore and worship and who deserves glory and honour.

² John Stott says in his Commentary on Ephesians in the Bible Speaks Today Series that "since apostles and prophets were both groups with a teaching role, it seems clear that what constitutes the church's foundation is neither their person nor their office but their instruction. Moreover, we are to think of them as inspired teachers, organs of divine revelation, bearers of divine authority."



THE SELF-SUFFICIENCY, SELF-EXISTENCE AND RELIABILITY OF GOD

6. Read several of the following passages and note what stands out to you about God's self-sufficiency, self-existence and reliability.

- Exodus 3:14
- Numbers 23:19
- Psalm 90:2
- Psalm 102:25-27
- Job 41:11
- Acts 17:24, 25
- James 1:17
- Revelation 4:11

7. What do the following passages tell us about God's need for us and the reason He created us?

- Psalm 50:10-12
- Isaiah 43:7
- Isaiah 62:3-5
- John 17:5, 24
- Ephesians 1:11
- Romans 15:5, 6
- 1 Corinthians 10:31



8. How does this make you feel? What is your response to these truths?

Summary

God is self-sufficient and self-existent. He has always existed and is not created. He can be relied on completely because He does not change. He has perfect relationship within the Godhead. He does not need us or anything else in creation. We were created for His glory and we can bring Him joy.

THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD

9. Pick a number of the following passages and note down what stands out to you particularly in relation to how you relate to God, how you relate with other people and how it affects your inner life

- Genesis 50:20
- Deuteronomy 10:14
- Job 42:2
- Isaiah 46:9, 10
- Jeremiah 32:17
- Psalm 135:6
- Psalm 139:1-16
- Romans 8:28-30
- 1 John 3:20

Summary

God knows everything, is everywhere and is in charge of everything. He can do anything, nothing is beyond his control. He is not limited by time and space. All our actions are under His God's providential care.



THE INTEGRITY OF GOD

10. Read a number of the following texts and note what stands out to you.

- Numbers 23:19
- Psalm 89:1-8
- Jeremiah 10:10, 11
- Lamentations 3:22-23
- John 17:3
- Philippians 1:6
- 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24
- Hebrews 6:17-19
- James 1:17

Summary

There are three aspects to this attribute of God. First, the God revealed in the Scriptures is the true or real God. He is God and no other. Second, His words are true. God does not lie. He represents things as they really are. We can again see how one attribute affects another. Because God knows everything, He cannot be mistaken in His perception or understanding of the world. Third, what God says He will do, He does. God is a faithful God. He always keeps His promises. This is a function of His unlimited power and capability. He never bites off more than He can chew!

11. How does this aspect of God's character affect you?

12. What are you trusting God for? How is that going?

DEEPENING YOUR UNDERSTANDING

13. How does this study make you feel about God?

14. What implications do these attributes of God have for how you live?

15. Take 15 minutes to praise God for who He is using some of the texts that stood out to you in this study.



STUDY 3 – WHAT IS GOD LIKE? (Part 2)

This second study on what God is like adds in several more attributes of God and starts to flesh out our picture of Him. Again, we will marvel at the God who is there.

THE HOLINESS OF GOD

The Bible calls God holy more than anything else. Holy is the epithet most often affixed to His name. Holy in the Hebrew means marked off or withdrawn from common use in order to be sacred. The sacredness of God is often conveyed to objects and places associated with Him. But holiness also has the idea of moral purity associated with it.

1. Read the following verses and note down what stands out to you about God's holiness:

- Exodus 15:11
- Psalm 99
- Hebrews 7:26; 12:14
- 1 Peter 1:13-17
- 1 John 1:5

2. Fear and reverence is a right response to God's holiness, how might you express that?



3. We are called to be holy as God is holy. Ask God to show you the area you most need to work on. How will you do that?

4. In Isaiah 6:3, God is called "Holy, holy, holy". The significance of the repetition of holy can easily be missed. Repetition in Hebrew is a literary device used to emphasize a point. For example, in Genesis 14 the story of the battle of the kings in the valley of Siddim mentions men who fell in the great tar pits of the region. Some translators call them asphalt pits, others bitumen pits, or simply great pits. Exactly what kind of pits they were is unclear because the Hebrew literally says "pit pits". The author was saying it is one thing to fall into a pit, but if you fall into a "pit pit" look out!

On a handful of occasions the Bible repeats something three times which elevates it to the superlative. Only one attribute of God is elevated to the third degree. The Bible says that God is holy, holy, holy. Not that He is merely holy, or even holy, holy, but that He is holy, holy, holy. The Bible never says that God is love, love, love or mercy, mercy, mercy or just, just, just. But, it does say that He is holy, holy, holy and the earth is full of His glory!

As mentioned in the introduction, Scripture never says that one characteristic is more important than another. So while we may not be able to understand why holy is the epithet most often affixed to God's name, nor why it is the only characteristic elevated to the third degree, it is interesting to ponder this. Share your ponderings with the group.

Summary

God is infinitely perfect in holiness. Not the slightest degree of sin taints His character. In Him there is not the slightest hint of any moral flaw.

God's holiness is a clear example of how one of His attributes affects the others. So, to be morally pure, He must be good, He must be just and so punish sin, He must be gracious, He must be loving, He must be compassionate, He must be faithful, He must be righteous.

THE GOODNESS OF GOD

The goodness of God means that God is the final standard of good, and that all that God does is worthy of approval. We could have considered mercy with this aspect as mercy is God's goodness toward those in distress, or grace as this is God's goodness to those who deserve punishment, or patience which is God's goodness toward those who continue to sin over a period of time.



5. Read the following verses and note what stands out to you about the goodness of God:

- Psalm 31:19
- Psalm 34:8-10
- Psalm 119:65-72
- Psalm 145:7

6. Read James 1:17. What are some of the good gifts God gives to everyone? What are some of the good gifts God only gives to His people?

Take some time to thank God for the good gifts He has given you

7. Larry Crabb in his book Finding God says:

“We may have trouble believing in his goodness – some events in life may introduce us to intense battles with faith that push us to breaking point – but our struggle to believe that he’s [God] good does not change the truth. He is unalterably good. He does not wish me pain. He longs to bless me, and he knows that my happiness depends on finding him. He has committed both his power and his heart to making me eternally happy. It’s the way he goes about honouring his commitment that sometimes unnerves me.”

What is your response to that quote? Consider Romans 8:28-31 as you formulate your response.

8. How would you describe or explain the goodness of God?



THE JUSTICE, RIGHTEOUSNESS AND WRATH OF GOD

In English justice and righteousness are different words, but in both the Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek New Testament there is one word group behind these two English terms. God's righteousness and justice means that God always acts in accordance with what is right and is Himself the final standard of what is right.

The wrath of God is related to His righteousness and justice. It requires deeper reflection, but it is necessary for us to obtain an accurate picture of the God who is there. God's wrath is His personal revulsion of evil and vigorous opposition to it. It means that He intensely hates sin and it must be considered in conjunction with His other attributes which affect it.

9. Read a number of the following verses and note what stands out to you, particularly the relationship between these attributes.

- Exodus 34:6, 7
- Deuteronomy 9:8
- Psalm 5:5; 11:5
- Psalm 89:13-16
- Amos 5:21-24
- Micah 6:8
- Acts 17:30-31
- Romans 3:10-31
- 2 Corinthians 5:10
- 2 Thessalonians 1:5-9
- Revelation 14:14-20; 15:3

10. How do you respond to these texts?



11. What would God be like if He were a God who did not hate sin?

12. When you underestimate these aspects of God's character, how does that affect your thoughts and behaviour?

Summary

God hates sin and is wrathful towards those who commit sin. This is an outworking of His righteousness and justice. However, God's wrath does not see Him explode in a fit of rage. His patience means that He waits giving all a chance to repent. His grace means that He pays the penalty for those who deserve punishment and His love means that He sends His only Son to die and to exhaust God's wrath.

THE LOVE, MERCY AND GRACE OF GOD

God's love means that God eternally gives Himself to others. His mercy is His tender-heartedness, loving compassion for his people. As we said above it is God's goodness to those in distress. By God's grace we mean that God deals with people not on the basis of what they deserve, their merit or worthiness, but simply according to their need. In other words God deals with them on the basis of His goodness and generosity.

13. Read a number of the following texts and note what stands out to you particularly in relation to the nature of God's love, how this love is shown, and the desirableness of those whom God loves.

- Psalm 103:8-18
- Lamentations 3:22-24
- Ezekiel 16:1-14
- John 3:16-18
- Romans 5:5-8
- Romans 8:35-39



- Ephesians 3:16-19
- 1 John 3:1-3
- 1 John 4:7-21

14. In what ways or situations have you felt most connected to God's love and a recipient of His grace?

15. When you underestimate these aspects of God's character, how does that affect your thoughts and behaviour?

Take some time to thank God for His love of you.

THE WISDOM OF GOD

God's wisdom means that God always chooses the best goals and the best means to those goals. God's decisions always bring about the best results – from God's eternal perspective.

16. Read these verses on wisdom and note the differences between worldly wisdom and godly wisdom.
- Proverbs 3:19-20
 - Romans 11:33-36
 - 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:16



- James 3:17

17. How does this aspect of God's character affect your relationship with Him?

18. Is Jesus the wisest person who has ever lived? Why or why not?

19. Do you really believe that God is working wisely in the world today? If you find it difficult to believe, what might you do to change your attitude?

Our God is the great majestic King who is high and lifted up, the One who lives in unapproachable light, the One who is worthy of all praise, who knows the end from the beginning, who knows our inmost thoughts, who spoke and created the universe out of nothing, the One who is from everlasting to everlasting, who is in control of all things, who is the very essence of holiness, love, truth, faithfulness, grace, generosity and love ... This God reveals Himself to us and seeks us out for a personal relationship. Except for Jesus' substitutionary death in our place exhausting God's wrath, we could not come into His



presence without being consumed. It is unbelievable! As Paul wrote: “Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God. How unsearchable His judgements and how inscrutable His ways!” (Romans 11:33). “Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly than we ask or think ... to Him be glory ... throughout all generations, forever and ever!” (Ephesians 3:20, 21)

DEEPENING YOUR UNDERSTANDING

20. In many ways, these two studies are mind blowing! Just to read about God and His majesty, greatness, glory, love, mercy, justice, wisdom ... is awe inspiring. So, it begs the question: What is *your* response to this? Here are a few Scriptures that talk of responses for you to read as you consider what *your* response is.

Psalm 27:4; 42:1, 2; Mark 12:28-30; Romans 11:33; 1 Corinthians 10:31; Hebrews 4:16; Revelation 4:9-11; 5:8-10

APPLYING TO YOUR MINISTRY

21. In the Navigators, we want to have a God focused culture and we have just considered the God who is there. In 1 Corinthians 3:10-11 Paul describes himself as an expert builder who laid Jesus as a foundation among the Corinthians and in Ephesians 2:19-21 where he says that the household of God is built on the foundations of the apostles and prophets [the Scriptures] and Jesus is the cornerstone.

- How do we lay a foundation of a God focused culture with Christ as the cornerstone and the Scriptures as foundational? What should we see? What would be some warning signs that you were laying different foundations? Briefly review these Scriptures as you ponder these questions:
 - John 14:21
 - Romans 1:5
 - 2 Corinthians 3:12
 - Ephesians 1:16-19
 - Ephesians 6:16
 - Philippians 2:3-11



- 1 Thessalonians 1:3
- 1 Thessalonians 3:2
- 1 Peter 3:15
- 1 John 3:3
- What are the implications for us? For example,
 - In our evangelism where is the emphasis: On the person Jesus or on the contract? Are we sharing 'Christianity' or Christ?

 - In our discipling is the focus on the person of Christ or the 'program'?

 - Are we using the Scriptures? Are they our source of authority or is experience, reason or the church more authoritative?



STUDY 4 – THE GOSPEL: GOD LOVES US

INTRODUCTION

In this study, we consider another essential of the Christian life: the Gospel. Gospel means good news. Being news it has content, it is a message. We may be a little surprised by what the Bible actually says that message is. The gospel is not merely a narrow set of teachings about Jesus and his death and resurrection which, rightly believed, get you into the kingdom. Yes, it is about what God has done in Christ, supremely focused on Jesus' death and resurrection, but it is much bigger than that according to the Bible. The gospel is an embracing category that holds much of the Bible together. It is the way you solve all your problems, the way you grow through every difficulty, and grow through reapplying, re-grasping and understanding the gospel.

That is partly why it is essential. It is foundational to every aspect of the Christian life.

THE NEED FOR THE GOSPEL

1. The first three studies focused on the God as He is the centre of everything. This holy, majestic, sovereign, independent and just God creates us. Reflect on Genesis 1. What one recurring word describes what God thought of His creation?
2. What happens in Genesis 3:1-10 (often called the fall) that changes this? What three reactions to sin are seen here?
3. What three relationships are damaged by the fall?
 - a. Genesis 3:8-10; 19b
 - b. Genesis 3:7, 12, 16; 4:8
 - c. Genesis 3:17-19.
4. What are the consequences of the fall for every person (except Jesus ☺) according to Romans 5:12 and Romans 6:23a?



THE CORE OF THE GOSPEL

5. What is a core element of the gospel according to:
- 1 Corinthians 2:2
 - 1 Corinthians 15:1-5
 - Galatians 6:14
6. As we saw in the third study God is rightly angry with our sin. He is wrathful. Now that is a scary, unpleasant and difficult thought. But it is what the Bible says, so we have to face up to it. Dealing with God's wrath is a very important part of the gospel and it's one of the key reasons Jesus' death is a core of the gospel. What do these texts tell us about this?³
- Romans 3:21-26

 - 1 John 4:10
7. Several images are used to deepen our understanding of this core element of the gospel, substitutionary atonement. Let's consider these texts:
- The image of justification is far and away the most prevalent image of salvation in the New Testament. Reconciliation is used five times, redemption four or five times, victory a couple of times, but justification some 229 times!⁴ (Note: righteousness and justification and their cognates are used to translate the same Greek word group.) What does Rom 3:21 – 5:11 tell us about righteousness and justification?

³ The key Greek word is *'hilasterion'* best translated "*propitiation*", which means to turn aside or exhaust wrath. Note the ESV uses *propitiation* and the NIV uses "sacrifice of atonement".

⁴ Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, p251.



b. What do the images of reconciliation, redemption, cleansing and victory add to the dominant picture of justification as part of the good news?

(1) Reconciliation – 2 Corinthians 5:11-21

(2) Redemption – Ephesians 1:3-14 and Ransom Mark 10:45 which are closely linked.

(3) Victory – Luke 11:14-23 and Colossians 2:13-15

(4) Cleansing/sanctify/purification - Hebrews 9:11-10:4

Each of these ways of speaking about the atonement is inspired Scripture and each highlights particular aspects about our salvation. Some today want to shy away from justification, but you just can't do that and be biblical. However, this does not mean you have to start evangelism with this image, but it does mean that you have to get to it over time.

*'But perhaps the single most consoling and appealing theme is what theologian Roger Nicole has called the one, irreducible theme that runs through every single one of these models – the idea of substitution. Dr Nicole taught that ... the essence of the atonement is always Jesus acting as our substitute. Jesus fights the powers, pays the price, bears the exile, makes the sacrifice, and bears the punishment for us, in our place on our behalf ... Jesus does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. He accomplishes salvation. We do nothing at all. And therefore the substitutionary sacrifice of Jesus is at the heart of everything.'*⁵

Jesus' death in our place on the cross, as a substitute for us, is called substitutionary atonement and is the heart of the gospel.

8. The resurrection is part of the things of "first importance" in the gospel according to 1 Corinthians 15:4. Why is this? Consider:

a. 1 Corinthians 15:17

⁵ Tim Keller, Center Church, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 2012 p 181



b. Romans 1:1-5

9. Two other elements are central to the gospel.

a. Read Ephesians 2:4-9. How does the grace of God underpin every aspect of the Gospel?

b. The gospel is a message that is about Jesus. But it's essential ethos revolves around the relationship we have with our heavenly Father and His Son, Our Lord Jesus Christ. What do these Scriptures say about this?

(1) Matt 4:18-22;

(2) John 14:6;

(3) John 15:4,5;

(4) Romans 8:10;

(5) 1 John 3:1,2 and Galatians 4:4-7

c. How does this relational element, which Paul consistently and frequently refers to as "in Christ" or "in Him" or "in Jesus", go to the core of the gospel according to Galatians 2:20; Rom 6:4-5,10 and Ephesians 2:5?

10. Write a couple of paragraphs to summarise this core element of the gospel, Jesus' death in our place.



In guilt/innocence based cultures the primary motive is centred around right and wrong. If one breaks the law or the rules they are guilty. Children are taught to feel guilty when they break the rules. The focus is on the fact that *I did* something wrong, regardless of whether others know or not (and if they think I did but I didn't, I'll protest my innocence!). My internal and individualistic judgement is what counts. So, by the same token, I may be wracked with secret guilt if I did do it even if the world believes me innocent. In the west, ethics is trying to determine if things are right or wrong.

The word shame or ashamed occurs 225 times in the Old and New Testaments and honour 170 times. This is a major theme of Scripture. In shame/honour based cultures relationships are the key as shame and honour always attached to something greater than the individual. Honour is almost always placed on a group like the family or the tribe or even the nation. It is the social reward a community gives to a person because of actions approved by the community. The result is a higher position and a closer relationship. Honour is about the preservation of social status, and respect and respectability. An action is honourable if it is praiseworthy. In honour cultures a person's sense of self is heavily dependent on how they are perceived by others. The focus is not on what you have done, but how (or if) others see what I have done. In the west telling the truth is right and telling lies is wrong, but in shame/honour cultures people don't think of lies as being right or wrong. The question is "Is what is being said honourable?" If a lie protects the honour of a tribe or nation, then it is fine. If a lie is told purely for selfish reasons, then it is shameful. If I didn't do something wrong but others think I did, then I am shamed. People are honoured when others are discreet, when we keep silent about their dirty linen, unless there is an overriding reason to wash it in public. The amazing thing about the Christian message is that God, who sees us as we really are, still deals with us mercifully.

Shame is the social punishment a community gives a person because of actions disapproved by the community resulting in lower status and a distant relationship. The key ideas with regard to shame are disgrace and exposure. Disgrace is the loss of approval, of status and of respect. Some things were not meant for public display. Such was the utter disgrace which Jesus endured when crucified naked on a Roman cross. He endured the shame of the cross and was honoured by God raising Him from the dead and exalting Him.

In fear/power based cultures people view the universe as a place filled with gods, demons, spirits, ghosts, and ancestors. Humankind needs to live at peace with all these powers and often they are fearful because they believe that everything in life is determined by the supernatural, like sickness, death, crop failure and victory in battle. Witchcraft and magic are very real for them. In order to appease the powers of the universe systems of appeasement are worked out. They vary from burning incense to human sacrifice.

11. How does Jesus' death in our place, His resurrection and our being brought into a personal relationship with King Jesus deal with the three primary reactions to sin?
 - a. Guilt
 - b. Shame
 - c. Fear



SUMMARY

Sin entered the world in the Garden of Eden and we see in Genesis 3 the three primary human reactions to sin. Adam and Eve know right from wrong. Their consciences kick in and they know they are guilty. Guilt is one of these primary reactions. We see a second reaction, shame. They cover their nakedness and hide themselves indicating that they are ashamed. Fear is the third primary reaction to sin and we are told that they are afraid of God. In other words, when humankind broke God's law, we were in a position of guilt. When we broke our relationship with God, we were in a position of shame. When we broke God's trust, we were in a position of fear.

Guilt is simply a sense of having done something wrong, which implies a law has been broken. Fear usually implies being afraid of a consequence. We are afraid of the consequences because of an action or inaction. Shame is the feeling of embarrassment or sense of unworthiness as felt in a relationship. Shame and honour is a major theme in the Scriptures where the good news is that you can move from defiled to clean, naked to clothed (ultimately clothed in righteous garments), abandoned/enslaved to adopted and honoured child of God and more. The gospel deals with all of these. It is about saving us from God's judgment, restoring our relationship with God, and rebuilding trust and putting power back into the hands of God by submitting to His rule.

These reactions to sin form the basis of three worldviews – Guilt/innocence (often dominant in the west); Shame/honour (often dominant in the east); and Fear/power (often dominant in animist cultures). Of course, no society or culture has a pure guilt/innocent, shame/honour or fear/power worldview. Each has all three mixed in in varying amounts.

Increasingly there are people from different cultures living next door to each other and, as globalisation continues, our worldviews are becoming less pure. For instance, many in the west are adopting shame/honour thinking as post modernism takes more and more hold, and there is an increase in thinking about the supernatural as evidenced by the growing number of movies and television shows that include witches, angels, demons and such like.

THE KINGDOM ASPECT OF THE GOSPEL

Kingdoms aren't things we in western society are terribly familiar with now. A kingdom is an administration – that is, a way of ordering things and getting them done. A new administration at your work, for example, is where there is a new boss and that means things are different now; there's a new order for getting things done and perhaps some new goals. The kingdom of God is like that, but on a much grander scale! The kingdom of God is about the reign or rule of God. It affects everything – both here now and for eternity. And there isn't just a new boss, but a King with ultimate power and authority. The kingdom of God comes about with the new king, Jesus. Notice Jesus' emphasis on it.

Mark 1:14 "... Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. ¹⁵'The time has come,' he said. 'The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!'"



Luke 8:1 “After this, Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God.”

12. Read these verses and note what good news, gospel, there is about the kingdom of God

- Mark 1:40-45
- Mark 5:21-43
- Mark 6:30-52
- Luke 11:14-20

13. Some people suggest that the gospel of the kingdom that Jesus preached is different to the gospel Paul preached.

a. What light do Acts 20:18-25, especially when you compare v21 and 25, and Acts 28:23, 30, 31 throw on this?

b. What would you say Paul thought the relationship was between the kingdom and the gospel?

14. Since Jesus is King and all areas of life are under His sovereign lordship, how should that impact how we live? What effect should we have on our society?



THE TRANSFORMATIVE ASPECT OF THE GOSPEL

15. Read John 3:1-10. What is being born again equivalent to? Hint: compare v3 and 5 (cross out the phrases that are the same).

Nicodemus is a member of the Jewish ruling council (3:1) which meant that he would have memorised the whole Old Testament. Not only that, but he is also “the teacher of Israel” (3:10) indicating that he was perhaps the head theologian in Israel. So, when Jesus links water and spirit and says to Nicodemus that he should have known (3:10b), it must be that he should have known it because it is in the Old Testament. Look at Ezekiel 36:25-27 where water and spirit are linked as a way of speaking of the new covenant. What light does this throw on what Jesus means by born again?

16. Another way of talking of the new covenant is found in Jeremiah 31:31-34. What is different about the new covenant? What light does this shine on what Jesus means by born again?

17. Look at John 3:8. How do you know where the wind is blowing?

Jesus means by being born again that God has given us a new heart of flesh so that we can respond to the Holy Spirit, that we have been cleansed, and the law is written on our hearts so we can be obedient. And He says that we know there is wind because we see its effects.



18. So, what do you think Jesus meant by “So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit” (3:8b)? Is this a promise of transformation which is part of the gospel?

19. What does Galatians 5:22, 23 mean for our transformation?

Transformation of our thinking and behaviour are difficult. No one is perfect! How we are transformed, including what role the Holy Spirit plays and what role we play, is the subject of different study. In this study, we are merely observing that the gospel, the good news, includes a promise of transformation. Now that is good news indeed!

ENTRY INTO AND LIVING WITHIN THE KINGDOM

20. Notice when this transformation occurs – after being born again. You do not (in fact you cannot) gain entry by being good or doing the right thing. Read Ephesians 2:4-10. How does the grace of God underpin every aspect of the gospel?

THE BREADTH AND HOPE OF THE GOSPEL

21. How is the gospel bigger than individual salvation according to:

- Romans 8:19-25
- Ephesians 2:14-16
- Colossians 1:19-20
- Colossians 2:13-15

22. Surely the good news has as part of it some hope for the future! What do these passages say that is?

- John 17:3



- Romans 8:31-39
- Revelation 7:9-12
- Revelation 21:1-22:17

23. What hope can we draw from Romans 1:16,17 and Colossians 1:5,6?

THE RESPONSE REQUIRED BY THE GOSPEL

Sometimes we can confuse our response to the gospel with the gospel itself. The gospel is news, and therefore it is announced or proclaimed. The gospel is the good news about what God has done, supremely in Jesus, BUT it does require a response.

Now it is best to be clear about the difference because if you run them together there is a real danger that the gospel that is shared turns into mere moralism. The emphasis can subtly change to what we have to do, our responsibility. What is particularly dangerous is that this is exactly how the world works – if you do well at school you get into your course at University, if you perform well at work you get a promotion. Therefore, it is very easy for the non-believer, and even for those who are believers, to fall into works thinking, into thinking that you are acceptable through what you do, into moralism.

Having said that, the other error to avoid is not being clear on the response required and therefore falling into “cheap grace” as Bonhoeffer called it; that is, trusting in God’s grace but not living a transformed life which is commanded by God.

24. What response is required to the gospel message according to

- Mark 1:15
- John 1:12
- John 3:16-21, 36
- Romans 10:8-17

25. Read the following texts and consider: can you separate belief and obedience? Why or why not? Does what you do matter for your salvation?

- Matthew 7:21-27



- b. John 14:21, 23

- c. Romans 1:5, 16:26

- d. Ephesians 2:8-10

- e. James 2:14-26

SUMMARY

The announcement of the gospel must also include the response of repentance and obedience that is required of us. Repentance and belief aren't part of the gospel, BUT must inevitably be part of what we share as we proclaim the gospel.

APPLICATION

26. Various aspects of the Gospel appeal to different people groups. What aspects of the Gospel appeal to you most and why?
-
-
-
-
-
-
-
-
-
-
27. Which of the truths of the Gospel we have considered do you tend to underemphasize or even ignore?



28. Do you have to share the whole gospel with someone before they can respond? If you don't think you have to, what bits would you say you had to share?

29. How is the gospel applicable to every believer every day?

30. Jonathan Dodson says that many Christians have a truncated gospel that “focuses on Jesus death and resurrection as a *doctrine to be believed, not on Jesus as a Person to be trusted and obeyed.*”⁶ Relationship is at the heart of the gospel.

- What is the overlap between an understanding about Jesus and what He has done and a relationship with Jesus?
- How does trusting a person rather than believing a doctrine show itself in your life?
- How is your relationship with Jesus? What could you do to grow it?

31. As one author has put it, the gospel is a multifaceted diamond and we tend to focus on one facet. Having thought deeply about the gospel, write out a one page picture of the gospel trying to incorporate all the aspects and images you have considered in this study.

⁶ J. Dodson, *Gospel Centred Discipleship*, Crossway, Wheaton 2012 p 108-110. Emphasis mine.





STUDY 5 – THE WORD: GOD TALKS TO US

INTRODUCTION

The truth and sufficiency for the whole of life is one of the Navigators' core values. Indeed, as our longest serving International President Lorne Sanny used to say: "We Navigators are among those kinds of Christians who believe that Jesus is who He said He is and that the Bible is what it says it is." We believe that the Scriptures are of supreme and final authority in faith and life.

Wesleyan Quadrilateral

Not everyone who calls themselves a Christian believes this. There seems to be four things someone could have as their final authority in the Christian life which a Methodist scholar deduced from John Wesley's work. It became known as the Wesley Quadrilateral.

Scripture	Reason
Tradition	Experience

All of them are important but the issue is, in the end which is the tail and which is the dog? Who's wagging who?

Reason. Some people effectively have reason as the ultimate determiner of truth. Scripture must bow to reason and things that don't seem reasonable can't be true. The criteria for reasonableness may be logical - the trinity doesn't make sense; or historical - the resurrection or miracles – not enough evidence, other explanations; or moral - I cannot believe in a God who would send people to hell, so I come up with universalism. So, whilst reason is important (we do not advocate blind faith) the problem comes when reason has the ultimate authority. So, a good way to think about reason is that reason is a very useful servant but an ineffectual master.

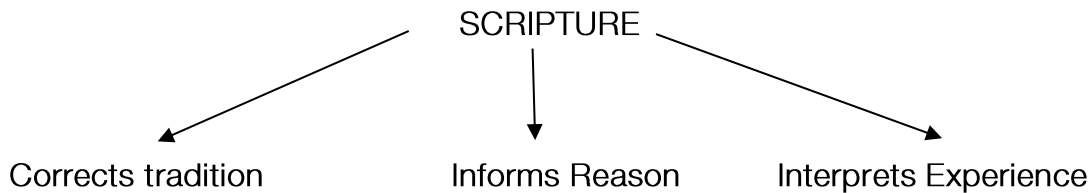
Church Tradition. Tradition isn't all bad. For example, the Apostles and Nicene Creeds are very good. The issue is whether they line up with Scripture and those do. The problem arises when church tradition becomes either the final arbiter or the infallible interpreter of truth. When the two come into conflict as they did at the reformation Martin Luther said the church had erred in the past but Scripture hadn't and we need to follow Scripture. He coined the famous sola scripture – Scripture alone.

Religious Experience. Religious experience is great. We are people who feel and we are in a dynamic relationship with Jesus! But, the issue comes when experience is made the supreme determiner of truth. It's when revelation moves from the Bible to what I feel, what God says to me. The problem is easy to spot when someone says that God told them to do something that the Bible says is sinful like to divorce their wife and marry the secretary from work whom they have fallen in love with.



Richard Niebuhr says that Scripture without experience is empty, experience without Scripture is blind.

Scripture. Reason, tradition and experience are good. They are all helpful, but the problem comes when they have the ultimate authority. Scripture must be allowed to function as the controlling norm over the other three.



Let's look at what the Bible says to see why this is the case.

REVELATION

We have seen in our earlier study about God that He is a God who is transcendent, that is He is 'above' time and space. He is the creator and sovereign ruler of the universe who dwells in unapproachable light.

1. How does one get to know anything of this God? Theologians talk of two ways: general revelation and special revelation.
 - a. General Revelation
 - Psalm 19:1-6 and Acts 14:16,17
 - Genesis 1:26-27 and Romans 2:14-16
 - b. How effective is that revelation according to
 - Genesis 3:1-10; 6:5
 - Jeremiah 17:9
 - Romans 1:18-21



c. Can we gain a saving knowledge from nature and seeing people alone?

d. Special Revelation

- Genesis 12:1-3
- Exodus 20:1-4
- 1 Kings 19:11-13
- Job 38-41
- Jeremiah 1:1, 2
- Ezekiel 30:1
- Luke 3:2
- John 1:1, 14
- Hebrews 1:2, 3a

2. How do we know when God is speaking to us and what He is saying?

INSPIRATION, CANON & INERRANCY

Who decided what would be in the Bible? Is what's in the Bible all God's word? Does the Bible contain any errors? Inspiration, canon and inerrancy are very important concepts and they are interrelated.

3. What does the Old Testament say?

- The writings of prophets – Exodus 24:4
- Numbers 23:19
- The words of a prophet – compare 1 Samuel 10:8 and 1 Samuel 13:13,14
- 2 Samuel 23:2
- Psalm 12:6, 7
- Psalm 18:30
- Psalm 19:7
- Psalm 119:160
- Proverbs 30:5
- Hosea 1:1

4. What did Jesus think of the Hebrew canon of the Old Testament? (note 'canon' comes from the Greek word meaning standard or rule)

- John 7:38 and 42;
- Luke 24:44, 45 (note that the Hebrew canon was subdivided into the law, the Prophets and the Writings which began with Psalms)

5. What does Jesus think of God's word according to John 17:17?



6. Now let's consider the rest of New Testament's view. What do these passages tell us?

- Acts 1:16
-
- Galatians 3:16

- Colossians 4:16 and 1 Thessalonians 5:27

- 1 Thessalonians 2:13

- 1 Timothy 5:18 - The first quote is from Deuteronomy 25:4, but the second quote does not appear in the Old Testament but it does appear in Luke 10:7

- 2 Peter 1:20, 21

- 2 Peter 3:15, 16

- Revelation and perhaps even the whole bible - Revelation 22:18-19

- 2 Timothy 3:16 Does this cover the Old Testament and the New Testament?

7. What do you conclude about the inspiration of the Bible? Who wrote it?

8. If it was written by God, through people, are there any errors in it?

No one seriously postulates that the New Testament documents were written while Jesus was alive, but they were written before the end of 1st century. You can see from the passages quoted above that a good number of the books were accepted as part of the canon very early. In fact, the vast bulk of the books of the New Testament were accepted quickly. The primary ground for this was apostolicity in that they were written by an apostle or a close associate of an apostle and given apostle sanction. For example, Mark was Peter's close associate and Luke was Paul's. So, by 150 AD the four gospels and Paul's 13 letters were accepted. By 200 AD Acts, 1 John and 1 Peter were also accepted and only Hebrews, Revelation, James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John and Jude were disputed. The gnostic gospels and a few others had been ruled out by then.

It took another 200 years for the last seven books, making up the New Testament Canon of 27 books, to be officially fixed in the sense of being ecclesiastically defined and universally accepted. This happened through a series of Councils around the world which occurred between 367 and 397 AD.

As you can see, such councils as there were, were late and few. They stand at the end of the process rather than at the beginning. No action of a council or a synod was early enough to have had a decisive influence on the course of events. The historical evidence suggests that in the course of the three centuries following its completion the canon gradually commended itself to the Church. So, that what the Councils did was not to impose something new upon the Christian communities but to codify what was already the general practice of those communities. The Church included them in her canon because she already regarded them as divinely inspired, recognising their innate worth and general apostolic authority, direct or indirect. This is quite in accordance with Christ's promise of the Holy Spirit to His disciples: the Spirit of truth who will guide you into all the truth (John 16:13; cf. 14:26; 15:26). The early church did not create the Canon. It received it as a gift from God. That's why we need to guard the good deposit according to 1 Timothy 6:20; 2 Timothy 1:14; 2:2.

The virtual unanimity with which the Church received the writings of the New Testament must be seen in the light of the special guidance and providence of God. One cannot imagine the canon being universally agreed today by all the church leaders of different denominations and nationalities around the world!

AUTHORITY

9. What do these verses tell you about the authority of God's word?

- Genesis 1



- Psalm 119:89
- Isaiah 40:8
- Matthew 5:18
- John 10:34,35
- Romans 1:16
- Ephesians 6:17
- Hebrews 4:12
- Revelation 19:11, 13

10. What conclusions can you draw from these scriptures about God's word?

CONCLUSIONS

God reveals Himself in nature but we suppress the truth that can be known about Him from there. Knowledge from nature is not sufficient to lead to salvation. We need God to speak to make things clear. For example, when the Israelites were taken into exile did that mean that God was not strong enough to stop that? Did that mean that they were being judged? Was God changing His people to be the Babylonians? It is only through Scripture that God reveals what He is doing and why things are happening. It was the same with Job. Scripture reveals that God was allowing Satan to test Job. And supremely in the cross – God reveals that Jesus' death in our place wasn't an accident, Jesus wasn't in the wrong place at the wrong time. He was God the Son paying the penalty for sin of the world so that we might be put right with God. Indeed, God has spoken most clearly in Jesus, who is called the word of God.

Jesus, Paul and others regarded and employed details of the Scripture as authoritative. This implies that the Bible is completely inspired by God, even to the selection of details within the text. This is in line with the Bible's teaching about God that we considered in study 2 and 3. You see, if God is all knowing as the Bible says, He cannot be ignorant or in error in any matter. Further, if He is all powerful as the Bible says He is, He is able to so affect the biblical author's writing that nothing erroneous enters into the final product and still let the personality of the author come through. In other words, the supernatural work of



God the Holy Spirit upon human authors of Scripture is such that what they wrote was precisely what God intended them to write in order to communicate His truth.

This view of inspiration logically entails the inerrancy of the Bible in the original manuscripts. We have to be careful to define what we mean here and many books have been written on the subject, so this will be an inadequate sweeping summary ... but hopefully it will be helpful. Inerrancy means that the Bible is completely true. The Bible has to be interpreted correctly, considering the genre, the context it was written in and the purposes for which it was given. We will consider how to interpret the bible in our next study. The definition allows for free quotes rather than precision – so if we say we live 5 kilometres from the railway station when we in fact live 5.1245 km from the railway station, what we said was true but not precise. Also, when we say the sun rises in the east, that is true even though technically we are moving around the sun so the sun doesn't rise but the earth spins such that it appears that the sun rises in the east.

This inspired, inerrant word of God, tells us specifically it is indeed Scripture. It is self-authenticating and God causes the church to recognise those books that are His. So “the Bible is not an authorised collection of books, but a collection of authorised books.”

TRANSMISSION

Finally, we need to consider the question: “Have we got true copies of these books?” How do we know that the gospel of John we have is the one that was agreed to?

For the Old Testament, we have the Dead Sea Scrolls which date from the 2nd century BC and confirmed the oldest copies we had of the Old Testament prior to the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls which were 1300 years older.

For the New Testament, we have over 24000 manuscript copies of portions of it with the earliest fragment written 25 years after it was written. The oldest full manuscript is 250 years after the event. No other document of antiquity even begins to approach this. Let's just take the second most attested document of antiquity – The Iliad by Homer. We have 643 manuscripts of it, it was written in 900 BC and the oldest complete preserved text dates from the 13th century – over 2000 years after the event. The oldest fragment of it is 500 years after it was written.

So, you can see that on two critical criteria, age and number of manuscripts the New Testament is far and away THE most attested document in the world.

But the sheer number and variety of manuscripts across time and locations creates another issue. They aren't all identical, but the vast majority of the New Testament has been transmitted to us with no, or next to no, variation. Anything that can be called a substantial variation is only about 1/1000th of the entire text. The main variants are the last 12 verses of Mark; and John 7:53-8:11 – the account of the woman caught in adultery. These are noted in most bibles. So, of those variants that do exist – not one of them affects any fundamental doctrine of Scripture.



How did this happen? Well it's the providence of God. But humanly speaking, there were these groups of people, the copyists, who had quite bazaar rules for their copying. Here are just a few. The skins of the original and copy must have the same number of columns and lines. Each column must have between 48 and 60 lines and the breadth must be 30 letters. Between every book there is to be three lines and the Pentateuch must finish exactly with a line. The copyists also calculated the middle word and the middle letter of each book. They counted all the verses that contained all the letters of the alphabet, or a certain number of them. They counted the number of times each letter appears in each book. The original and copy had to match.

We can be sure that the Bibles we have are true copies of the original manuscripts.

APPLICATION

What would you say to someone who said they didn't think the Bible was the word of God?

11. What would it look like today to delight in God's Word (Psalm 1:2), to be devoted to the teaching from God's Word (Acts 2:42), for it to be more precious to you than MUCH silver and gold (Psalm 19:10 and 119:72)?

12. How does Isaiah 66:2 add to this?



13. Read 2 Timothy 3:16, 17. How is the word of God transforming you and making you complete, equipped for every good work?

14. What area is God speaking to you about (Hebrews 4:12)? What will you specifically do about that this week?



STUDY 6 – THE WORD: INTERPRETATION AND APPLICATION

INTRODUCTION

Every reader of an English Bible is involved in interpretation. Whatever English Bible is used is a translation so the starting point of an English Bible reader is the end result of much scholarly work. Indeed, the reason we have so many different English translations shows us this. Further, we bring with us all of our experiences, culture and prior understandings of words and ideas. We cannot help but do this. For example, when we read texts about church we automatically envision people sitting in a building with pews or seats much like what we do now. But there were no church buildings for the first two hundred years of Christianity.

There are five main parts that play an important role in interpretation: having a right attitude, observation, original author's intent, God's intent and application.

RIGHT ATTITUDE

Last study we saw that the word of God, the Bible, is God's inspired word and so it is inerrant and authoritative. This is the foundation for the first principle.

Principle 1. We must come to Scripture with an attitude of humility, of dependence on God to speak to us through it and of submission to its authority.

It is important to start with this attitude, because although we use the techniques for understanding the Bible that we use for any other piece of literature, the Bible is no ordinary piece of literature. We should begin by asking God to help us as interpreting the Scriptures is a spiritual exercise (Psalm 119:118; 1 Corinthians 2:6-16).

This attitude of humility will help us hear from God (Psalm 25:9). It will also help us as God tells us that wisdom is found in those that take advice (Proverbs 13:10). Indeed, the apostle Paul rebukes the arrogant and contentious Corinthians for not listening to the broader Christian community: *Did the Word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached?* (1 Corinthians 14:36). Of course, we need to listen to those Christians who understand that the Bible is the word of God.

We will say more on the spiritual nature of the Bible as we come to application as it is very important in that context.

Knowing some of the principles that help us in interpretation does not in any way devalue the work of the Holy Spirit in illumining our hearts as we read the Bible. But this illumination will be in line with the meaning the Holy Spirit inspired not some mystical reading we read into the Scripture. It also has primarily to do with how the Spirit applies these things to our



lives once we understand the message. He does not do the work of interpreting for us, but he works with our conscience to bring it in line with the Scripture.

OBSERVE

Principle 2. Take time to observe what the text actually says (and what it doesn't say).

Some ideas to help with observation are:

- Repeated reading: include different translations.
- Underline phrases that stand out or repeated words or ideas.
- Notice the structure or arrangement of the passage.
- Highlight the big ideas.
- Notice connecting words or phrases.
- Memorizing helps us look carefully at what the text actually says.

ORIGINAL AUTHOR'S INTENT

Based on our observation of what the text actually says, we try to understand what the writer meant. This involves understanding the words the writer uses, the grammar of the sentences, the context of the passage itself, and the wider context in which it was written.

Principle 3. We must understand the type of literature we are dealing with and interpret it accordingly.

In this book, we have all sorts of types of writings, individual episodes. We meet real people in real situations. By reading the bible we can see what it looks like when real individuals, groups and peoples relate to the living God. But we meet them through a variety of different types of writing. There are a lot of mini-stories and historical narratives, and there are also letters to churches, prophetic writings, wisdom literature, poetry and of course the unique apocalyptic style of writing like we see in Revelation and parts of some of the OT prophets.

These various literary types are not to be interpreted in the same way. We should adjust our reading style according to the type of literature we are reading. There are different principles and ways of interpreting these types of writings as well as expectations we should have as we read them. If we want to understand what the author is communicating and ultimately what God is communicating, it's important to respect the author's style and skill. The author's intent is very important. See if we interpret apocalyptic (which is a distinct type of writing that Revelation is written in) as an ordinary story we will misunderstand what God is saying. A flat reading of Revelation is a little like seeing a political cartoon and thinking that is a photograph of a real person. The type of literature is important. In a similar vein when reading the book of Proverbs we need to be aware of the danger of reading these statements as promises from God. Many of them are simply great truths,



principles or generalisations phrased in a striking way to get our attention and make us face up to life in the real world. The point is that it is important for us to not try to make the bible say more (or less) than it really is by ignoring the type of writing we have before us.

Consider poetry. Sometimes mistakes are made in interpreting Scripture because poetic passages are misunderstood or interpreted literally as you might read a letter or narrative. But with poetry we are dealing with images and figures of speech, symbolic language and verse form. It is often, over the top, and not literal. It deals in pictures not propositions. It's often focussed on human emotions and feelings with pictures given to help us understand these emotions.

Principle 4: In the immediate context you are reading, think paragraphs.

Many interpretive mistakes may also be avoided by constantly thinking about the immediate context. The basic unit of thought in this is the **paragraph**. Verses are set in paragraphs which are set in larger units of thought and to understand the verse, we had better understand what the author was driving at when he wrote that verse.

The way interpretation often goes is from:

*Words - sentences – **paragraphs** – larger unit of thought – theme of book*

However, words only have meaning in a larger context and it's the same with sentences. The basic unit of thought is the paragraph. So, a better way to interpret is:

Theme of book – larger units of thought – paragraphs – sentences - words

Note: The original text did not have paragraph markings like our modern translations (it didn't even have chapter and verse marks). The translators have created the paragraphs in our Bibles so it is important for us to read the larger context to see if we agree with their work. The authors certainly had their thinking in paragraphs but the original readers would have figured it out by their own judgement.

Principle 5. Must also understand the Historical context

We need to be aware of the difference between our context and the historical context. God caused each book to be written in an historical context by an historical author. He did this deliberately and so it matters what that context was and what the author's intent was as God was working through him because the Bible is ultimately written by the Holy Spirit and is perfect. Every letter of each word is important as Galatians 3:16 makes clear.

This may take a little detective work. We may need to refer to bible notes or simple commentaries to fill in a few gaps in our understanding. Important questions to ask are ones like: 'For whom was this book originally written?' and 'Why was it written for them?' The historical context can give power to illustrations, examples, acts of faith etc and sometimes helps with obscure terminology we may not otherwise understand. For example, this often helps in the interpretation of the occasion for the writing of the letters of the NT that were written to specific communities and people with specific issues in mind



that they were facing. So, in Revelation 3:15,16 the Laodicean church was said to be neither hot nor cold, but lukewarm and he will spew them out of his mouth. It has often been interpreted as hot being on fire for God and cold being against to God. So being lukewarm is worse than cold – it is indifferent to God. But some digging has turned up that Laodicea’s water supply came via an aqueduct from hot springs a few kilometres down the road. By the time it got to the city, it was lukewarm – neither good for drinking like cold water or good for bathing like the hot springs.

Some good questions to ask are:

- What would it have been like to be in their shoes at that time?
- How did they respond?

Note on the post-modern debate. In summary, the post-modern idea is that “texts mean what the reader understands them to mean and the intent of the original author is not determinative since it can never be known.”

- With appropriate humility and recognition of our own fallibility, we should recognize the limitations of words to convey meaning and the limitations of our ability to be confident of the intent of the author. So, we should be careful about dogmatism!
- But clearly our life experience shows us that words can and do convey meaning and hearers/readers can understand the meaning of what is said or written!!
- Our confidence is in **God’s ability to make Himself understood** more than it is in our ability to understand. Since we believe that God has chosen to reveal Himself through His Word, we are confident that he is able to make Himself understood to those to whom He has given His Spirit.

GOD’S INTENT

The Bible has a single author – God. This means that the disparate letters and stories from different authors over 1400 years are brought together under the authorship of God. This has several implications for interpretation. The principles we have been considering form the basis for how we understand any book. However, we can over balance on this and treat the Bible as an object with ourselves in control, rather than opening ourselves up to God and the Holy Spirit and allowing him to be in control.

So, while we must come to the Bible as any other book in one sense, in another sense we need to approach it very differently from the other books we read.

Principle 6. We must understand the overall story and interpret the piece of Scripture we are dealing with taking into account where it fits in the overall story.

God authorship of the Bible has not resulted in a well organised and carefully indexed religious instruction manual or a collection of abstract reflections on the nature of God and



people. Rather it is story-like. Not story in the sense of fiction or myth but true story, an historical narrative. This story is formed by the gathering together, over many centuries, of a colourful collection of writings of almost every conceivable type. Taken together these writings paint a picture of God and people in relationship. They form the 'authorised story' of God's relationship with the human race.

The bible is a '*meta-narrative*' (meta = alongside, an "alongside-story"). A meta-narrative is designed to help us think about life - all of life. We are to read this story in parallel with our everyday experience. We are to place it alongside other accounts of human history. It is designed to help us ask the really big 'world-view' questions of life? 'Who am I/we?', 'Why am I/are we here?', 'What is God like?', 'What is wrong?', 'What can be done about it?', 'What happens when you die?' It is a worldview-shaping book. It points us to particular answers to these questions, a particular view of human history. It helps us view human history and our own lives from God's perspective. It helps us interpret our everyday experience. The bible is the place to discover the really important truths upon which we can base the whole of our lives. Truths that will establish our purpose and values. Truths that help us think about our mission and destiny.

The Bible is not written to give us detailed recipe-like instructions for every situation we encounter, rather it gives us a framework for thinking about specific issues. As we read it, it will stir us to think deeply about life. We will find ourselves assimilating the great principles, truths, and values that can be applied to any situation and issue. The bible directs us and gives us boundaries in much the same way as the banks of a river direct and contain the flow of the river.

The fact that the bible is a *big-picture* story is reflected in the titles given to its two parts: The Old Testament and The New Testament. A testament or covenant is a foundation document. Technically a testament is a document that forms a binding agreement or promise for two partners. It establishes the parameters for their life together. It sets the framework for their relationship. The bible is a two-stage covenant document for God's people. It is the inspired written record of how God promises to relate to us and how he wants us to relate to him.

Because the Bible is one big story and because it is the foundational document for the Christian faith we need to work at developing a familiarity with the bible as a whole. To get the big picture we must aim over time to read all the stories - the whole book – and to re-read and re-read them. Each contribution is written by real people living in real situations experiencing God in their own particular historical and cultural contexts. They are like stories within the big story, stories of individuals, communities and peoples relating to God and to one another. Pieced together these episodes tell us about the central character – God. They tell us about who God is and they tell the moving story of His amazing love for the human race.



Principle 7. Jesus is the centre of story and we need to interpret the Bible in this light.

In this big story, Christ is the centre. Clearly the gospels are centred on Christ. They tell of His incarnation, sinless life, substitutionary death, bodily resurrection and ascension. These are all critical for hermeneutics. A person's interpretation of them is fundamental to their interpretation of the rest of the Bible.

What is not as obvious is that the Old Testament is centred on Jesus too. In fact, Jesus Himself points us to this on the road to Emmaus where He indicates that the whole Old Testament is about Him (Luke 24:25-27; 44-49 see also John 5:39,40,46). One would have loved to have been there and heard His exposition, but as we were not we must discern how the Old Testament points to Jesus. The framework for this is the promissory structure of the Old Testament which anticipates the coming of a Saviour. Jesus is the climax of the Old Testament story. He is the fulfilment of the covenantal promise to Abraham to be a blessing to all the nations (Genesis 12:3, Galatians 3:14,29). He is the fulfilment of the Mosaic, Davidic and new covenants. Indeed, 2 Corinthians 1:20 says "all the promises of God find their yes in him".

Christ is the key to understanding the unity in the midst of the diversity of the books of the Bible. Jesus is the transcendent norm within Scripture. Because the Bible is written by God, it is a unified book. It has "a unity of source (in God), of function (covenantal rule), of narrative (the fulfilment of promise), and of message (the gospel of Jesus)".⁷ When we read it in this light, as Jesus Himself taught us to do, the richness and depth of its meaning become apparent.

INTERPRETATION

Principle 8. Scripture is consistent, unified and progressive and thus our best source for understanding a particular text is other Scripture.

Moreover, the fact that the Bible is not only is the Bible a set of discrete books, but one big story as the Word of God to us means that it is consistent in its theme and view of God and His purposes. Therefore, if we have questions as we read a section of Scripture our best source for solving this is the rest of Scripture. For example, the image of the lamb of God in John 1 derives its meaning from the Old Testament. Our understanding of Hebrews is greatly enhanced if we have read and understood the Old Testament's foundation of covenants, priests, tabernacle, law and sacrifices. Revelation can be difficult because of the type of literature it is, but also because it has many images and references directly or indirectly to other Scripture.

Additionally, many apparent difficulties can be resolved by understanding when they are occurring within the scope of God's **progressive** revelatory process. The Prophets did not

⁷ P.F. Jensen, *The Revelation of God*, (Leicester: IVP, 2002) 224



understand all that they were prophesying about (1 Peter 1:12), Paul had revealed to him things that prior to his time were mystery (Ephesians 3:3).

Some questions to help with this interpretation in this area of God's Intent:

- How does this Scripture fit into the great theme of God's revelation of himself?
- Why did the Holy Spirit inspire these words?
- What is the Holy Spirit telling His people through the ages through this passage?

APPLICATION

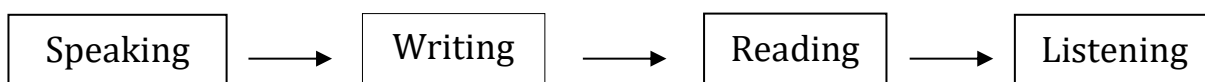
We have been relying on the Holy Spirit to lead and guide us throughout the process, but in the application section, our reliance on Him becomes more overt.

Principle 9. Depend on the Holy Spirit for illumination and application

The early chapters of the book of Hebrews are helpful in showing us the difference between reading the static words on the page and listening to the living voice of God. The writer encourages his readers repeatedly to listen for the speaking voice of God as they read and think about the Old Testament Scriptures. This culminates with the writer saying in Hebrews 4:12, 13, "The word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart". In the footnotes of the NIV study bible for this passage we read, "This is the dynamic word of God, active in accomplishing God's purposes it is a living power that judges as with an all-seeing eye, penetrating a person's innermost being The author associates the activity of the word with the activity of God as though they are one and the same - which in a sense they are." Obviously, the writer of the book of Hebrews is encouraging his readers to encounter and experience God as they read the words of Scripture.

This idea is repeated in other parts of the bible. In 2 Corinthians 3:14-18 Paul speaks of people who read the Scriptures without encountering God. He says they are reading as if a veil or barrier is covering their hearts. He teaches that what really should happen as they read the bible is that with the help of the Holy Spirit they should have a life-changing encounter with Jesus Christ.

Jesus himself said in John 5:39 that we must not see the Scriptures as an end in themselves. He said, "You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify of me, and yet you refuse to come to me to have life". The Scriptures are a means or a vehicle for coming to know Jesus Christ. The sequence looks like this:



God is speaking and we are listening. He is speaking through His word that He has written and that we are reading. This process is more than a cognitive exercise. Here the things required of us are *relational*. We must engage in activities like listening, praying, reflecting, internalising, inviting and sensing. Qualities like openness, longing, humility and trust are needed. Here the outcome is *becoming someone* rather than *knowing or doing something*. In this encounter, we are changed and drawn closer to God.

When Jesus was preparing his disciples for his departure he did not talk about leaving them a book to read. Instead he talked about sending them a person to relate to - the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, Jesus taught, was the invisible hand behind the writing of the Old Testament and in time he was to become the invisible hand behind the writing of the New Testament. Jesus told his disciples that the Holy Spirit was coming to be with them (see John 14-17). In fact, Jesus said he would be present in every Christian community and in every individual Christian until Jesus himself returned. This is very important to understand when it comes to reading the bible. It rescues reading the bible from being a mere human exercise, where we are left to our own devices, to an exciting encounter with God himself.

Many people do not experience God speaking when they read the bible because they do not expect to. They have not realised that someone is present to help them hear God. They have not learnt to rely on the Holy Spirit. For these people reading the bible almost *takes the place* of relating to God. They read it as if God were invisible and remote. Almost as if God does not know them personally.

The fact of the matter is that God is present with us when we read the bible in the person of the Holy Spirit. He is within us explaining, interpreting and making personal what he has written. Knowing this produces expectancy.

The really encouraging thing about this is that the Holy Spirit not only helps us understand and hear God, he also helps us understand and hear ourselves. In his hands the bible is not only a window through which we can view God, it is a mirror through which we can view ourselves (James 1:22-25). Who better to help us understand ourselves than the one who "searches all things, even the deep things of God"? (1 Corinthians 2: 10). So just as the bible is designed to give *God-knowledge*, it is also designed to give *self-knowledge*. This is important because in any deep relationship both parties must reveal themselves. Intimacy with God is bringing all that I am to all that He is.

So just as I can trust the Holy Spirit to speak the words I really need to hear from God, I can also count on him to help me to discover and express my own deepest thoughts and feelings back to God (Romans 8:26,27). In short, He makes heart-to-heart communication possible.

Our part in all this is to be open and responsive as we read the bible. The Holy Spirit is not only directing our attention to the words on the page, he is directing our attention to our own hearts. We can cooperate with him by asking questions like: What is this passage stirring in me? How do I feel as I read this? Where do I feel challenged, encouraged,



excited, confused? What memories, situations and relationships come to mind? How do I feel moved to respond to these situations and relationships? How do I see myself as I read this? What am I longing for as I read this? What would I love to be true of me in regard to this?

He will also be showing us things about God, giving us insight into God's great heart of love for us, revealing aspects of his character, his ways and his purpose. In short, he will help us get to know God. He will bring aspects of God's person and purpose to bear on who we are and what we are currently facing.

In all of this it is important to be aware of the danger of reading things into the bible or of making the bible say what we want it to say. We are on very shaky ground when we take particular words and phrases in the bible, written 2000 years ago, as personal instructions for us today. When we say things like, "God told me to do such and such when I read this verse in the bible today", we need to be clear about what we mean. The Holy Spirit is not in the business of over-riding our minds and wills and issuing personal instructions in a magical way through the words of the bible. Rather as we read the bible we should expect him to raise relevant issues in our lives and circumstances, reveal God's heart with regard to these things, expose our own inner thoughts and attitudes, and leave us free and accountable to respond appropriately. Increasingly as we learn to make such responses they will be accompanied by a strong sense of having been spoken to and directed by the Holy Spirit.

It is also important to realise that the Holy Spirit will not limit himself to matters of personal and individual importance. It is very easy to trivialise His ministry. The bible was not just given to individuals but to whole communities and peoples. As we read the bible God will call us to involvement in the world around us. Involvement in spreading the gospel, establishing justice, helping the poor, protecting the environment, enriching family and community life, etc.

Principle 10. Apply in your context.

This involves translating the lessons we have learned to our own situation. The situations we are we facing are bound to be different. We can't simply copy the actions and behaviours of the bible characters. We might ask ourselves how the characters in the bible story would have responded in our time to our issues. We will need to think how the truths, principles and values that guided them would find expression in our context. The specifics will not be the same but the underlying values and principles that guided them will be relevant. Some questions to help in this principle are:

- In the light of what I saw of God at work back then what can I conclude he will be doing now?
- What will he want me/us to do?
- Why is this passage important for the people of God today?



Principle 11. Interpret, apply and teach difficult or disputed passages humbly, harmonising difficult texts where possible

Interpret difficult or disputed passages in the light of:

- The most natural sense of the words as used in the context (taking account of the type of writing and the context of the writer).
- Other passages which address the same subject and whose meaning is clear.
- The overall weight of Scripture relating to this subject.
- The history of the church's understanding over the centuries, but be aware of biases of particular periods, cultures, and writers. Look at different translations and commentaries by respected, godly, Bible-believing writers. (Sometimes the Bible throws more light on the commentator than the commentator throws on the Scriptures!).
- When there are apparent contradictions in Scripture we should seek to harmonise them because of our conviction that all Scripture is inspired by God and the corollary of inerrancy. For example, Matthew 27:5 which says that Judas committed suicide by hanging himself and Acts 1:18 which says that "falling headlong he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out". We should do this humbly and be prepared to either say we don't know as there must be some relevant data we currently don't have, rather than harmonise every problem passage. So, in this case some pushed the harmonisation too early and came up with ingenious but highly unlike harmonisations. Some said that Judas hanged himself, the rope broke and he flipped head over heels. We have discovered relatively recently from ancient papyri that the Greek translated in Acts 1:18 as "falling headlong" has another meaning in Koine Greek, street Greek which the bible is written in. It also means "swelling up". It is now possible to hypothesize a solution to the apparent contradiction. Judas hung himself and the body was not discovered for some time. In such a situation, the visceral organs begin to degenerate first causing swelling in the abdomen which happens when cadavers aren't properly embalmed. And so, the "swelling up [Judas] burst open in the middle and his bowels gushed out". While there is no way of knowing for sure if this is what happened, it seems a reasonable resolution of the difficulty.⁸
- Be humble! Don't be afraid of saying "I don't know" or reserving judgment. Where there are disagreements, remember the principles of Romans 14.
- Determine your own convictions and use them to evaluate your own conduct not to impose them on others.
- Respect the convictions of others; don't judge.
- *Make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification* (verse 19).

⁸ Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, p231,238



To read the bible well requires us to take into account the ancient and historical nature of its writings, the fact that it is God’s word and therefore has a unity, and to cultivate a sensitivity and responsiveness to the Holy Spirit.

RIGHTLY HANDLING THE WORD OF TRUTH

Interpreting the Scriptures is increasingly becoming an issue. 2 Timothy 2:15 says that a labourer “rightly handles the word of truth”. Applying the principles we have just outlined will help equip us do that. We will undertake an example of a couple of the principles before applying the whole method to a few passages.

1. Principle 3 is “We must understand the type of literature we are dealing with and interpret it accordingly”. Consider poetry. Read Psalm 1 and Psalm 102:3-11.
 - What is the basic concept of these passages?

 - What figures of speech do you see?

 - What images?

 - How does poetry enhance our understanding of what is going?
2. Principle 4 is “In the immediate context you are reading think paragraphs”. Discuss the meaning of these passages which sometimes are considered out of their context:
 - 1 Corinthians 3:16-17

 - Matthew 18:20



3. Principle 6 is “We must understand the overall story and interpret the piece of Scripture we are dealing with taking into account where it fits in the overall story”. To properly understand any particular part of the bible we need to have some appreciation of where that part fits into the big story. Let’s briefly outline what the big story is by noting the major events of salvation history:

- Genesis 1,2 – Creation, for example
- Genesis 3
- Genesis 12:1-3
- Exodus 20
- 2 Samuel 7:8-16
- 1 Kings 12:16-24
- 2 Kings 17:1-6, 18-23
- 2 Kings 25:1-26
- Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:24-26
- Matthew 1:18-25
- Matthew 27:45-54
- Matthew 28:1-10
- Acts 2:1-13
- Revelation 20:11-15
- Revelation 7:9
- Revelation 21:1-22:5

Draw a picture to illustrate this outline.



4. To help us with the big picture consider what answers does the Bible give for the “world view” questions of life

- Who am I/we?
- Why am I/are we here?
- What is God like?
- What is wrong?
- What can be done about it?
- What happens when you die?’

5. Let's apply all the principles to a few different examples in the Scriptures. For each passage answer the following questions using the principles we considered above:

- What does the text say? Summarize the passage in your own words. Outline: note the main points in bullet form. Try to identify the main point of the passage and then explain how the passage amplifies the main point and fits into the context.
- What is the original author's intent?
- What was God's intent?
- How does it apply today to me and/or our society?

a. 2 Samuel 7:4-16 (Old Testament Prophecy)

b. Proverbs 22:1-16 (Wisdom literature)



c. Matthew 28:16-20 (Gospel narrative)

d. Romans 3:21-26 (New Testament Letter)

e. Revelation 7:6:12 (Apocalyptic)



STUDY 7 – PRAYER

WHAT IS PRAYER?

Prayer is an essential aspect of being a Christian. Prayer is a conversation where your life and your God meet. Prayer, simply put, is talking to God. It is both a conversation and an encounter with God. It involves “the awe of praising His glory, the intimacy of finding His grace, and the struggle of asking for His help all of which lead us to know the spiritual reality of His presence. These will not happen every time we pray, but each should be a major component of our prayer over the course of our lives”⁹.

WHY PRAY?

1. What reasons does the Bible give for us to pray?
 - a. Mark 1:35; Luke 6:12
 - b. Matthew 7:7-11
 - c. Ephesians 6
 - d. Philippians 4:6,7
 - e. 1 Timothy 2:1-2
 - f. 2 Corinthians 1:11, Philippians 1:19, Acts 12:5, James 5:15ff, 1 John 5:16
 - g. James 5:16-18
 - h. Luke 22:40, 46
 - i. 1 Thessalonians 5:17 and Colossians 4:2

2. What conclusions can you draw?

⁹ Tim Keller, *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God*, p5



3. Reflect back on who God is from studies 1-3. How does it feel that you can come into the presence of that God, call him dad, and share with Him? How might that cause you to pray?

HOW TO PRAY?

4. How often should we pray according to Matthew 7:7-11 and 1 Thessalonians 5:17? Explain what this means/looks like.
5. What should be our attitude in prayer? Read Luke 18:9-14

There are several practical resources on our website to help with this.

WHAT TO PRAY?

6. The Bible must reform our prayer life as it must reform our ethics, our doctrine, our church life, our family life and work and everything else! So let's consider some of the prayers of Scripture to see what is prayed for in scripture and in the light of that consider what we should pray. Note down what is prayed for in these scriptures:
 - a. Exodus 32:9-14, 32:31-32; 33:12-17. What are the grounds for Moses' prayer? What does Moses pray for?
 - b. Psalm 27:4
 - c. Psalm 42, 43



- d. Psalm 51
- e. Psalm 63:1-8
- f. Psalm 139:23, 24
- g. Psalm 145
- h. Daniel 9:3-19
- i. Matthew 9:35-38
- j. Luke 11:1-4
- k. John 17
- l. Romans 1:8-10
- m. Romans 10:1
- n. Ephesians 1:15-23
- o. Ephesians 3:14-19
- p. Ephesians 6:18-20

- q. Philippians 1:3-11
- r. Philippians 4:6, 7
- s. Colossians 1:3-13
- t. 2 Thessalonians 1:11-12
- u. 1 Timothy 2:1-4
- v. 1 Peter 5:7

7. What are things that are prayed for most? Are these the things that dominate your prayer life?

8. Read John 16:24 and Ephesians 3:20. If you are praying to the God who is sovereign, who is all powerful and turns the heart of kings – what is the biggest thing you are praying for?



9. If prayer is about a conversation and an encounter with God, how does God speak to us?

- a. 1 Kings 19:11-13
- b. John 10:27
- c. 2 Corinthians 12:7-9
- d. 2 Timothy 3:16
- e. Hebrews 1:2

How do you discern what God is saying to you?

10. What are some reasons that our prayers may not be answered as we want?

- a. Psalm 66:18
- b. Isaiah 59:1, 2
- c. Matthew 21:22
- d. John 16:24
- e. James 4:2-3,6
- f. 1 Peter 3:7



SUMMARY

There are three basic kinds of prayer: praise and thanksgiving; confession; requests for ourselves and for others. The requests seem to be more weighted towards what we call the strategic prayers – asking for people’s salvation, for them to grow in their godliness and the like. Of course, God cares about the whole person so we can ask for anything, something that is making us anxious, a minor ailment whatever.

The main thing is to pray frequently, even “without ceasing”. God loves to answer prayer. Sometimes it is yes, sometimes wait and sometimes no. May we all be devoted to prayer.

Here’s how Tim Keller sums up prayer¹⁰

What It Is

Work	Prayer is a duty and discipline
Word	Prayer is conversing with God
Balance	Prayer is adoration, confession, thanks and supplication

What It Requires

Grace	Prayer “in Jesus’ name” based on the gospel
Fear	Prayer is the heart engaged in loving awe
Helplessness	Prayer is accepting one’s weakness and dependence

What It Gives

Perspective	Prayer reorients your view toward God
Strength	Prayer is spiritual union with God
Spiritual Reality	Prayer seeks a heart sense of the presence of God

What It Takes Up

Self-Knowledge	Prayer requires and creates honesty and self-knowledge
Trust	Prayer requires and creates both restful trust and confident hope
Surrender	Prayer requires and creates surrender of the whole life in love to God

¹⁰ Tim Keller, *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God*, p 141



APPLICATION

11. Read 2 Corinthians 6:18. If you are anything like the majority of Christians you know that God is your Father, that you have true intimacy with Him based not on how good you are but on the goodness of Jesus. You know that Jesus is your brother and you are a fellow heir with Him. Yet you relate to your Father rather distantly, sometimes wondering if He is listening or even there. Your mind wanders when you are talking to Him even for a few minutes, you're not sure what to say and then you feel guilty and give up for a while. How do you cultivate an attitude that you are praying to a heavenly father who loves you? How do you cultivate an intimate relationship with God?

12. Read Colossians 4:12. What do you think it means to struggle in prayer?

13. What encouragement is there in Romans 8:26, 27 and James 5:16b?

14. What do you find most difficult about prayer?

15. What do find most encouraging about prayer?



16. What are you praying for that only God can bring about?

17. Who are the people you are praying for? What are you/will you pray for them?

“The great people of the earth today are the people who pray. I do not mean those who talk about prayer; not those who can explain about prayer; but I mean those people who take time and pray. They have not time. It must be taken from something else. This something else is important – very important and pressing, but still less important and less pressing than prayer.”

SD Gordon

