02

Revelation

God Speaks

Thirteen points every follower of Jesus should know. A study by Pastor Andy Cisneros.

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Revelation: *God Speaks*

"So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God." 1 CORINTHIANS 2:11–12

People have a real appetite for information and communication. From cell phones to televisions, e-mail, radios, iPods, Web sites, blogs, books, magazines, newspapers, movies, songs, text-messages, face-to-face conversations people want to know and be known.

In this fountain of information, the real question is, how do we hear the voice of God? Does God speak internally through my spirit? Does God speak externally through a holy man like a teacher or a prophet? Does God speak through ancient wisdom or collected traditions? Or, perhaps, God does not speak at all because God is not relational but a mute force, distant and disinterested in us? Or, maybe, God does not exist at all?

One of the first things we learn about God, in Genesis, is that God reveals himself in words - no less than ten times. The opening chapter of Genesis says, *"God said."* God speaks. That truth is affirmed thousands of times in the Bible. It is the foundation of Christian faith (See Hebrews 1:1).

The Creator of the whole universe created humans in His image, thereby enabling them to communicate with Him in relationship. Despite sin, God still initiates relationship by making Himself known. The opposite of revelation is speculation, where religions, spiritualities, and philosophies seek to discover who God is apart from God's self-revelation. (Expand on this idea)

Revelation is all about getting to know God. Our relationship with God begins as He reveals information about Himself. As we receive it and believe it, which is an act of faith, we begin to experience life together with God. Then there is commitment and transformation as faith grows as the result of this revelation. This results in the joyous desire to spend time with God's people, to learn more about Him by witnessing His work in their lives. It also creates a desire to share with the world the revelation of who God is and what he has done through Jesus Christ. In the same way that someone who has fallen deeply in love can't stop talking about the person they enjoy and introducing him or her to everyone they know, so it is with the new convert.

How Does God Reveal Himself?

General Revelation

God reveals himself to everyone everywhere through general revelation. General revelation includes creation, common grace, and conscience. Romans 1:18 – 32 describes this process and the results of man's refusal to accept, results that are so obvious to us in our day.

God reveals Himself through creation. The psalmist says, *"The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. . . . Their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world."* (Psalm 19:1 – 4). The prophet Isaiah proclaims, *"The whole earth is full of his glory*!" (Isa. 6:3). As we noted earlier Romans 1:19–20 echoes and expands the Old Testament voices, saying, *"For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made."* Through creation—the heavens and earth, plants and animals, galaxy and weather—God has made Himself and his power, His love, and glory, known. People everywhere see his wisdom, majesty, power and divine nature, justice, and goodness, but, most refuse to acknowledge it.

The most awe-inspiring aspect of creation is the human body. Every doctor who studies the body, every mother who births a child, every grandfather who holds a grandchild, and every person who stops for just a moment to consider the eyes that God gave them to read these words and the mind He gave them to understand them, should be brought to a sense of worship and wonder. Understanding the love and mindfulness God has bestowed upon humanity the Psalmist writes in Psalm 8:3–4, "*When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?"*

God's general revelation also includes common grace. Augustine (AD 354–430) used the term *common grace* because it is for everyone and, therefore, common to all human beings. Through common grace God reveals his love to all people, though not in a saving way (personal grace). God's common grace includes the water we drink, food we eat, sun we enjoy, and rain we need, as God is good to the sinner and saint alike (Matt. 5:45). The effects of God's common grace are innumerable. God's common grace allows even those who despise Him to learn and make gains in areas such as science, philosophy, technology, education, arts and medicine. God's common grace allows societies to flourish, families to exist, cities to rise up, and nations to prosper. Common grace also allows people who are not connected to God through Jesus Christ to live what looks like decent moral lives of compassion and service, though their deeds are not in any way done to God's glory as acts of worship. The result of God's common grace is that life as we experience it is far better than could otherwise be possible if sinners were simply left to themselves. Everyone experiences the grace of God to varying degrees, no matter how sinful they are. This is simply because God is loving and good and is determined to do good in love. Anyone who has laughed, held a baby, enjoyed the warmth of the sun on their face, gone for a swim, or watched a sunset has enjoyed a measure of God's common grace.

God also reveals Himself through the conscience He's given us as His image bearers. Almost everyone knows it is wrong to murder your neighbor, lie to your neighbor, and steal your neighbor's wife, because God has written his morality on human hearts. Even sinners know to give good gifts to their children

because God created us with a conscience that serves as a moral compass. While some people ignore their conscience, the fact that others see their violation of what is right and good serves only to reinforce the truth that through our conscience God has revealed himself as holy and just. While the Holy Spirit convicts the whole world of sin. The Bible declares over and over again that all mankind are sinners. That no-one is righteous, but, most refuse to even consider the judgment that must come as a result.

General revelation means that all people know God in a general way because He has made Himself known through creation, common grace, and conscience. As a result, Romans 1 says that those who *"suppress the truth"* of God made known through general revelation are *"without excuse"*; so they are without excuse and their place (lake of fire) is deserved. His goodness and kindness, which are shown to all, are intended to lead people to repentance (Romans 2:4). Those who follow the truth of general revelation can enjoy further revelations and a personal relationship with God that can lead to eternal life. Many examples of such revelations could be given, but some include God sending missionaries to an unreached people group that's open to the gospel; God sending dreams and visions of Jesus to Muslims in countries otherwise closed to the gospel; and even sending an angel if necessary to communicate the gospel of Jesus Christ. In short, we trust the goodness of God to deal justly with all people.

PERSONAL REVELATION

For anyone to have a saving knowledge of God requires that, in addition to general revelation, they also must receive and believe personal revelation. This is because while general revelation is good and true, it is not sufficient for someone to know that God sent Christ to die on a cross in our place for our sins. (Shouldn't we add to this His ascension and planned return to establish the Kingdom of God?)

Christians have always believed that God is real, personal, and relational. We believe it is only by God's gracious self-revelation that anyone comes to know Him. God has acted and spoken in such a way as to make Himself known so that people will be able to enter into a personal relationship with him. He revealed His plan and purpose in Jesus Christ. During his ministry, Jesus was led and empowered by the Holy Spirit. That power also inspired the writing of the Bible and the sanctification of our lives.

God continues to reveal Himself today, and the primary way he reveals himself is through the inspired and authoritative Word of God, the Bible. The Bible is unique and solely God's completely trustworthy revelation to us today. Scripture is the court of highest authority for Christians and their leaders, by which any alleged revelation from God is to be tested.

What Are the Scriptures?

Scripture is God speaking his truth to us in human words. The New Testament writers claim that the Old Testament is sacred Scripture, which literally means "writing." The word Bible comes from the Greek word for book. Holy Bible, therefore, means "Holy Book." It was originally written in three languages (Hebrew,

Greek, and a bit in Aramaic) over a period of more than fifteen hundred years by more than forty authors (of varying ages and backgrounds) on three continents (Asia, Africa, and Europe).

The Bible actually contains sixty-six separate books. Thirty-nine books, approximately three-quarters of the Bible, are in the Old Testament, which is a record of God's speaking and working in history. It begins with the creation of the universe and our first parents, Adam and Eve, up until about 450 BC. In the period between the two testaments the people waited for the coming of the Messiah. The twenty-seven books of the New Testament begin with the four Gospels, which record the life and teachings, death, burial, resurrection, and ascension, of Jesus. This is followed by a short history of the infant church (Acts) and then proceeds with a series of letters intended to instruct various Christians and Christian churches about how to think and live in light of who Jesus is, what he has done and what is to come.

The Bible is a library of books that are one Book, showing unity and continuity. This point is illustrated by the fact that the New Testament has roughly three hundred explicit Old Testament quotations, as well as upwards of four thousand allusions to the Old Testament. In many ways, the Old Testament is a series of promises that God makes and the New Testament is the record of the fulfillment of many of those promises and the anticipation of the fulfillment of the remaining promises at Jesus' return.

The Bible is the best-selling book of all time. The Old Testament was originally written on papyrus—a form of paper made out of reeds. By the time the New Testament was written, parchments (prepared animal skins) were also used (2 Tim. 4:13). The pages were put together into scrolls.

Chapters and verses were added to provide addresses (not unlike those on our homes) that help us find particular sections. In 1205, Stephen Langton, a theology professor who became the archbishop of Canterbury, began using Bible chapters. In 1240, Cardinal Hugo of St. Cher published a Latin Bible with the 1,189 chapter divisions that exist today. Robert Stephanus was a Protestant book printer who was condemned as a heretic for printing Bibles. As he fled with his family to Geneva on horseback he arbitrarily made verse divisions within Langton's chapter divisions. His system was used for the first English Bible (The Geneva New Testament of 1557) and became today's system of 31,173 verses. It is important to realize that the Bible's chapters and verses were not applied with any logical or consistent method and, while helpful, they are not authoritative. Because the Bible was not intended to be read in bits and pieces, reading verses out of context can lead to serious misunderstanding. Rightly interpreting particular sections of Scripture requires paying attention both to the immediate context and the overall context of all of Scripture.

What is Revealed in the Bible?

Defining the central message of the Old Testament is the key to our interpretive process, because, without a proper understanding of Scripture we do not have access to truly loving and knowing God's plan for His creation.

Some people prefer the New Testament to the Old Testament because they believe that it is only the New Testament that has merit; that it alone is intended for the church. However, it was Jesus himself who taught that the Old Testament was primarily about him. While arguing with the theologians in his day, Jesus chastised them, saying, *"You search the Scriptures* [Old Testament] *because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life"* (John 5:39). Following his resurrection, Jesus opened the Old Testament to teach others about himself: *"Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself"* (Luke 24:27). Likewise, in speaking to his disciples, Jesus said, *"These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled"* (Luke 24:44). We then read that he *"opened their minds to understand the Scriptures"* (v. 45). Jesus' own words about himself as the central message of the Old Testament are clear. He said, *"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished"* (Matt. 5:17 – 18). Jesus repeated this fact throughout his ministry by saying he "fulfilled" particular Scriptures. (See Luke 24:27)

When Scripture is rightly interpreted, it is ultimately about Jesus, our Savior, the object of our faith, forgiver of our sins, and giver of eternal life. To correctly interpret Scripture you will need to connect its verses, concepts, and events to Jesus.

The Old Testament predicts the coming of Jesus and, in a variety of ways, prepares people for his work. The New Testament reflects on the life of Jesus, particularly in the four Gospels, and reports the results of Jesus' life and ministry, particularly in the Epistles [Letters]. The Old Testament uses various means to reveal Jesus, including promises, foreshadowing and types.

1. The Old Testament teaches about Jesus in the numerous prophetic promises given about him. At the time of its writing, more than one-quarter of Scripture was prophetic in nature, promising future events. No other world religion or cult can present any specific prophecies concerning the coming of their prophets. However, in the Old Testament we see hundreds of fulfilled prophecies extending hundreds and sometimes over a thousand years into the future, showing God's foreknowledge of and sovereignty over the future

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2. Types are Old Testament representative figures, institutions, or events that foreshadow Jesus. Examples include Adam, who foreshadows Jesus as the second Adam; the priesthood, which prefigures Jesus as our high priest; David and other kings, who prefigure Jesus as the King of kings; Moses and the prophets, who foreshadow Jesus as our ultimate prophet; animal sacrifices, which foreshadow Jesus as the sinless Lamb of God slain for our sins; the temple, which foreshadows God's presence dwelling among us in Jesus; shepherds who care for their sheep, which remind us we are as foolish and vulnerable as sheep, but, Jesus

our shepherd keeps constant watch over us; and judges who foreshadow Jesus as the final judge of all people; and many others, such as Jesus the true bread, the true vine, and true light as well as the rock that provides living water.

3. We also see people in the Old Testament who perform various kinds of service that are comparable to the service that Jesus performs perfectly. Unlike the first Adam, Jesus Christ, the Last Adam, passed his test in a garden and in so doing offered his righteousness to us that we might overcome the sin charged to us through the sin of the first Adam. Jesus is the true and better Abel who, although he was innocent, was slain and whose blood cries out. When Isaac carried his own wood and laid down his life to be sacrificed at the hand of his father Abraham, he was showing us what Jesus would later do. Jesus is the greater Jacob. Jesus also wrestled with God in Gethsemane and, though wounded, He walked away from his grave blessed. Jesus is the greater Joseph who serves at the right hand of God the Eternal King and extends forgiveness and provision to those of us who have betrayed him. He uses his power to save us in loving reconciliation. Jesus is greater than Moses in that he stands as a mediator between God and us, bringing us the new covenant.

Like Job, innocent Jesus suffered and was tormented by the Devil so that God might be glorified. Also, Like Job, his friends were no help or encouragement as He stood before those who would condemn Him. Jesus is a king greater than David; he has slain our giants of Satan, sin and death. Jesus is greater than Jonah in that he spent three days in the grave, not just in a fish, to save a multitude even greater than Nineveh. When Boaz redeemed Ruth and brought her and her despised people into community with God's people, he was showing what Jesus would do to redeem his bride, the church, from all the nations of the earth. When Nehemiah rebuilt Jerusalem, he was doing something similar to Jesus, who is building for us a New Jerusalem which will be established here on earth. When Hosea married an unfaithful whoring wife that he continued to pursue in love, he was showing us the heart of Jesus, who does the same for his unfaithful bride, the church.

We also see various Old Testament events preparing people for the coming of Jesus Christ. For example, in the Exodus account of Passover the people were to place blood over the doorframe with hyssop (a common herb bundled for cleaning) and no one was to leave their home until the morning. Death would not come to any home marked with lamb's blood. Peter says our salvation is given through Jesus Christ and the *"sprinkling with his blood"* (1 Peter 1:2).

To properly understand the Old Testament we must connect it to the work God is doing in Jesus. This should not be done in an allegorizing manner, rather; the meaning of the Old Testament includes symbolism [types and shadows] that are fully revealed in Jesus and the coming kingdom of God.

Unless Jesus is the central message of the Scriptures, many errors abound. The most common is moralizing. Moralizing is reading the Bible not to learn about God's plan for a Kingdom but only to learn principles for how to live life as a good person by following the good examples of some people and

avoiding the bad examples of others. That kind of approach to the Scriptures is not Christian, because it treats the Bible like any other book with moral lessons that are utterly disconnected from faith in and salvation for the Kingdom of God.

Who Wrote the Bible?

As a major part of his teaching ministry Jesus often taught about the future, the coming kingdom of God. Over and over the Bible tells of Jesus preaching "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt, 4:17 et al), that He went about "proclaiming the gospel (good news) of the kingdom" (Matt 4:23). In Luke 4:43 Jesus is quoted saying, "I must preach the kingdom of God to other cities also, for I was sent for this purpose." In several other places He is quoted saying, "The kingdom of heaven" (Matthew's term) is like . . ." or "the kingdom of God is like . . ." Near the end of His earthly ministry Jesus promised them that one day he would leave them, but he would send the Holy Spirit to perfectly remind them of his life and teachings so that they could write and teach accurately and truthfully to complete the Bible. (See Matt. 16:21 – 23 and John 16:5 – 14).

The human authors of the Bible include kings, peasants, philosophers, fishermen, poets, statesmen, a doctor, and scholars. The books of the Bible cover history, sermons, letters, songs, and love letters. There are geographical surveys, architectural specifications, travel diaries, population statistics, family trees, inventories, and numerous legal documents.

The Bible is a book written by both God and man. But it was not co-authored. It was not God and humans collaborating, or a human writing a draft with God making revisions, or God giving ideas that the human authors put into words. They were not words dictated to humans. The Bible is not human writings that become divine when the reader discovers spiritual meaning in them, as with the writings of many Eastern religions. It is not one of many books containing the religious insights of ancient sages, as many liberals teach. People who were providentially prepared by God, and motivated by the Holy Spirit (2Tim. 3:16) spoke and wrote according to their own personalities and circumstances in such a way that their words are the very Word of God. God's supernatural guidance of the writers and their situations enabled them to receive and communicate all God would have us know for His glory and our salvation. We call this *divine inspiration*. Putting it a bit more technically, the writings themselves have the quality of being God-breathed. It is not the authors or the process that is inspired, but the writings.

The belief that God wrote Scripture with human authors who He inspired to perfectly record His words is called verbal (the very words of the Bible) plenary (every part of the Bible) inspiration (God-breathed revelation). This means that God inspired not just the thoughts of Scripture but also the very details and exact words that were perfectly recorded for us as Scripture.

When we say verbal, we believe that the very words are inspired and important, chosen by God, so every word does matter. That's why Jesus can say "not an iota, not a dot" of the Law can be ignored (Matt. 5:18). We cannot limit the divine inspiration to concepts that God put in the mind of human authors who did their best to put those ideas into words. Rather, His revelation comes to us in those exact words. When we say plenary, we mean there are no parts of the Bible we don't believe, don't like, or won't teach or preach or obey. We can't ignore parts of the Bible as primitive, dismiss them as outdated, or explain them away with human reasoning. *All* Scripture is inspired. Paul shows us what the proper attitude toward Scripture should be:

*"All Scripture is God breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work."(*2 Tim.3:16-17)

Peter echoes Paul's words:

"No prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." (2 Peter 1:19-21)

Peter tells us that the Bible is not made up like a fairy tale. Because the Scriptures come from God, they speak to things no human could know and they do it with perfection. For example, the writers of the Old Testament could not have made up prophesied details such as a virgin birth in the tiny town of Bethlehem.(Micah 5:2) If God had not moved them, they could not have seen the future in such detail. Because God alone is sovereign and all-knowing of the future, He revealed exactly what would happen.

The biblical authors knew they were writing the word of God. Paul told the Corinthians, *"The things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord."* (1 Cor.14:37) He had the courage to give them a commandment from Jesus and then put his own command right alongside it, as having equal authority (1Cor. 7:10) Paul quotes the Old Testament as Holy Scripture: *"For the Scripture says, 'You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain,'" and then he quotes Luke right alongside it, saying, "The laborer deserves his wages."*(1Tim.5:18) Peter also compares the letters of Paul to "*other Scriptures."* (2 Peter 3:15-15)

Taken all together, the Scriptures make incredible truth claims. The Scriptures are:

- Given by God's inspiration- 2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:19–21
- The very words of God-1 Thess. 2:13
- All we need to know God-Luke 16:29
- A perfect guide for life-Proverbs 6:23
- Pure- Psalms 12:6; 119:140
- True- Ps. 119:160; John 17:17
- Trustworthy-Proverbs 30:5-6
- Perfect; Psalm 19:7

- Effective; Isaiah 55:11
- Powerful; Hebrews 4:12
- Not to be taken from or added to; Deuteronomy 4:2; 12:32
- For everyone; Romans 16:25-27
- The standard by which all teaching is to be tested; Acts 17:11
- To be obeyed. James 1:22

Speaking poetically, the Scriptures also claim to be:

- Sweet like honey; Psalms 19:10
- A lamp to guide our life; Psalms 119:105
- Food for our soul; Jeremiah 15:16
- A fire that purifies and a hammer that breaks us; Jeremiah 23:29
- A sword; Ephesians 6:17;Hebrews 4:12
- A seed for salvation planted in us James 1:21
- Milk that nourishes us. 1 Peter 2:2

What is the Canon of Scripture?

The canon of Scripture is the collection of books that the church has recognized as having divine authority in matters of faith and doctrine. The term comes from the Greek word *kanon* and the Hebrew word *qaneh*, both of which mean “a rule,” or “measuring rod.” The canon is the authority to which other truth claims are compared and by which they are measured. To speak of canonical writings is to speak of those books that are regarded as having divine authority. They are the books of our Bible. The thirty-nine books of the Old Testament and twenty-seven books of the New Testament preserved by God in the Bible are the inspired Word of God. The church recognized that these books constitute the complete canon inspired by God and received them as uniquely authoritative because they are God speaking to his people.

F. F. Bruce says:

“One thing must be emphatically stated. The New Testament books did not become authoritative for the Church because they were formally included in a canonical list; on the contrary, the Church included them in her canon because she already regarded them as divinely inspired, recognizing their innate worth and generally apostolic authority, direct or indirect. The first ecclesiastical councils to classify the canonical books were both held in North Africa—at Hippo Regius in 393 and at Carthage in 397—but what these councils did was not to impose something new upon the Christian communities but to arrange what was already the general practice of those communities.”

Time after time Jesus and his apostles quoted from this distinctive body of authoritative writings. They designated them as “the Scripture,” (Romans 4:3) “the Scriptures,” “the holy Scriptures,” “the sacred writings,” (2Tim. 3:15) and so forth. They often introduced their quotations with “It is written”; that is, it stands firmly written.

We call these authoritative writings the Old Testament. Jewish people call them the Tanakh, an acronym formed from the first letters of Torah (Law), Naviim (Prophets), and Ketubim (Writings). We see this idea when Jesus explained to his disciples “everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” It is important to note that the Tanakh includes the same material as the Protestant Old Testament, though they arrange the books differently.

Beginning two hundred and fifty years before Christ, Greek-speaking Jews living in Alexandria translated the Old Testament into Greek, calling it the Septuagint. For some unknown reason, they changed the content of several books, added many books, and rearranged the order of the books.

Early Christians followed Jesus and used the same books as found in the Hebrew Bible today. But as the center of Christianity moved away from Jerusalem and Christians read and worshiped more in Greek than Hebrew, there was more openness to the books of the Septuagint. There was a long and complicated debate about the validity and status of these books. Eventually the Roman Catholic Church adopted many of the books of the Septuagint into its Latin version, called the Vulgate. They referred to them as deuterocanonical, meaning they were canonized later. As the Reformers attempted to rid the church of many traditional teachings and get back to the Bible, they also rejected the deuterocanonical books, calling them the Apocrypha *(of doubtful origin)*. They kept the ordering of the Vulgate but returned to the authoritative books of Jesus, the Hebrew-speaking Jews, and early Christianity.

The early church immediately recognized most of the books of the New Testament as canonical. The four Gospels, written to preserve and spread the story of Jesus to the whole church, were received gladly and universally, as were the writings of Paul, including 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus (also known as the Pastoral Letters). Acts, 1 John, 1 Peter, and Revelation were also universally recognized. However, Hebrews remained in dispute for several centuries, especially in the West, because of the anonymity of its author. The status of James, 2 Peter, 2 John, 3 John, and Jude fluctuated according to church, age, and individual judgment and are occasionally omitted from canonical lists. Some works of the apostolic fathers, such as the Epistle of Barnabas, the Shepherd of Hermas, and the first and second epistles of Clement are sporadically cited as potentially Scripture but are not usually included in formal canonical lists.

In the fourth century the church moved to settle the issues of the New Testament canon. In the East it was done in the Thirty-Ninth Paschal Letter of Athanasius in AD 367. In the West the canon was fixed at the Council of Carthage in AD 397.

Was the New Testament canon disputed? Not really. Virtually all the books were immediately accepted. Did the church canonize the books? Not at all. Rather, they recognized and confirmed their canonical status.

J. I. Packer writes:

"The Church no more gave us the New Testament canon than Sir Isaac Newton gave us the force of gravity. God gave us gravity, by His work of creation, and similarly He gave us the New Testament canon, by inspiring the individual books that make it up.

How did the church know which books ought to be recognized as canonical?"

What were the criteria for canonicity? They used three primary criteria:

1. Conformity to "the rule of faith." Did the book conform to Christian truth recognized as normative in the churches?

2. Apostolicity. Was the writer of the book an apostle or did the writer of the book have immediate contact with the apostles? All but a few New Testament writers were eyewitnesses to the events they recorded. (John 19-20, Acts 1 and many more) Though not eyewitnesses, Luke received his information from Paul (2 Tim. 4:11) and numerous eyewitnesses, while Mark received his information from Peter, who was an eyewitness (1Peter 5:13). James and Jude were closely associated with the apostles in Jerusalem and were probably Jesus' brothers, which would have also made them eyewitnesses.

3. Catholicity. Did the book have widespread and continuous acceptance and usage by churches everywhere? In considering the great agreement surrounding the canon of Scripture, scholars have said:

"The fact that substantially the whole church came to recognize the same twenty-seven books as canonical is remarkable when it is remembered that the result was not contrived. All that the several churches throughout the Empire could do was to witness to their own experience with the documents and share whatever knowledge they might have about their origin and character. When consideration is given to the diversity in cultural backgrounds and in orientation to the essentials of the Christian faith within the churches, their common agreement about which books belonged to the New Testament serves to suggest that this final decision did not originate solely at the human level."

Why Were Some Books Not Accepted as Scripture?

In recent years, the so-called lost books of the Bible have enjoyed revived interest. For example, Dan Brown built much of the storyline of his bestselling book, The Da Vinci Code, on the premise that the church selected the four canonical Gospels from eighty similar books. The others, it is said, were stamped out by "a Church that had subjugated women, banished the Goddess, burned non-believers, and forbidden the pagan reverence for the sacred feminine."

Even by the most generous count there are fewer than thirty "gospels." Only the canonical Gospels date from the first century. The earliest of the others was written more than one hundred years after Jesus lived. Most of them are dated at least two hundred years after Jesus.

Contrary to false accusation, not one of these "lost gospels" was hidden by the church. No "lost" gospels have been discovered. All of the discovered books were referred to in the church fathers' writings because they knew of their existence but simply did not consider them sacred Scripture. Some older or more complete copies of them have been discovered, most significantly in the Egyptian Nag Hammadi site. Peter rightly called these kinds of claims about lost gospels and suppressed teachings about Jesus "cleverly devised myths" with no basis in fact or reality (2 Peter 1:16)

There is no reason to be concerned about any lost gospels containing truth that we need about God. Anyone curious about their truthfulness should simply read them. The Gospel of Philip supposedly says that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were married. In fact, it says, "And the companion of the [. . .] Mary Magdalene, [. . .] her more than the disciples [. . .] kiss her on her [. . .]. The rest of [. . .]. They said to him, 'Why do you love her more than all of us?'" (The ellipses in brackets indicate where the papyrus is broken and lost.) To say the least this is extremely slender evidence for Jesus' marriage that some purport, even if this very late, clearly Gnostic gospel, was accepted as authentic, which it is not.

The Gospel of Thomas is one of the earlier and most widely affirmed of the Gnostic gospels. It is not a gospel in the sense of a narrative that tells the story of Jesus. Rather, it consists of 114 sayings attributed to Jesus, some of which clearly parallel sayings in the canonical Gospels. But that is where the similarity ends. It was written at least a century after the four biblical Gospels, long after the eyewitnesses to Jesus Christ were dead. It clearly reflects Gnostic theology built on a belief system that despised earthly and material realities and exalted the "higher" spiritual plane. The "god" of Thomas is a second-rate angelic being who rebelliously created this physical world. Humans are presented as spiritual beings ensnared in a wretched physical body. The only attention given to the humanity of Jesus was when trying to excuse it. The canonical Gospels, however, provide a very different picture of Jesus: a man who is fully human, in body and spirit, and who had disciples and friends, both male and female.

To make the differences between the real Gospels in the Bible and the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas clear, just read its final adage:

"Simon Peter said to him, 'Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of life.' Jesus said, 'I myself shall lead her in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every woman who will make herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven.'" (Acts 13:7, The Gospel of Thomas).

Regarding the wrongly termed "lost gospels," New Testament scholar Craig Blomberg has said:

"In no meaningful sense did these writers, church leaders, or councils "suppress" Gnostic or apocryphal material, since there is no evidence of any canon that ever included them, nor that anyone put them forward for canonization, nor that they were known widely enough to have been serious candidates for inclusion had someone put them forward. Indeed, they would have failed all three of the major criteria used by the early church in selecting which books they were, at times very literally, willing to die for—the criteria of apostolicity (that a book was written by an apostle or a close associate of an apostle), coherence (not contradicting previously accepted Scripture), and catholicity (widespread acceptance as particularly relevant and normative within all major segments of the early Christian community)."

To be fair, there are a handful of other ancient books that have some good content. Books such as the Shepherd of Hermas and the Didache were appreciated by the early church and are akin to some popular Christian books today that can provide some insight but do not rise to the level of Scripture or fall to the level of heresy. But only a few individual churches and teachers wanted them included in the canon. In simplest terms, they were not accepted because they were not God's Word for his whole church.

From the very earliest days, the church knew which books were "God's inspired word" for them. They read them, studied them, obeyed them, lived them, and passed them on. We should do the same without adding anything to the Scriptures. Proverbs 30:5–6 commands just this, saying, *"Every word of God proves true; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him. Do not add to his words, lest he rebuke you and you be found a liar."*

Does Scripture Contain Errors And/or Contradictions?

We believe that what the Bible teaches is true, so we come to the Bible with what J. I. Packer calls "an advance commitment to receive as truth from God all that Scripture is, found on inspection, actually to teach." So we believe that all that the Bible teaches is truth from God, whether statements of fact about earth, humans, or God, or moral commands, or divine promises. This has been the universal affirmation of the church until the time of the Enlightenment, when acceptance in the secular academy led some biblical scholars to base their conclusions on culturally misguided reason rather than on revelation and reality.

The affirmation of the truthfulness of the Bible is tied to the character of God Himself. God is a truthful God who does not lie. Therefore, because God is ultimately the author of Scripture, it is perfect, unlike every other uninspired writing and utterance. Taken altogether, inerrancy is the shorthand way of summarizing all that the Scriptures say about Scripture. Inerrant means that the Scriptures are perfect, without any error. Because God does not lie or speak falsely in any way, and because the Scriptures are God's Word, they are perfect (Titus 1:2, Hebrews 6:18). As a result, the entire Bible is without any error.

We find such explicit statements in passages such as 2 Samuel 7:28, *"O Lord GOD, you are God, and your words are true"*; Psalm 19:7–10, which uses words such as perfect, sure, right, pure, true, and righteous; Psalm 119:42–43, 142, 151, 160, 163, which uses the specific word truth or true; and John 17:17, *"Your*

word is truth." 2 Timothy 3:16 rightly says, *"All Scripture is breathed out by God."*

Unlike the Bible, however, those of us who read and study it are not inerrant in our understanding of it. The Bible itself gives us much cause for humility as we approach the Scriptures because:

- God's thoughts are much loftier than ours;
- God has secrets that He has not revealed to anyone;
- Sometimes we see the truth as if through a dirty window; (1 Cor. 13:12)
- We are prone to resist God's truth because it forces us to repent
- We know in part; (1 Cor. 13:9)
- Some parts of the Bible are just hard to understand. (2 Peter 3:15-16)

Therefore, if it appears that there is a contradiction in Scripture, we should first dig deeply into our Bible to see if what appears to be an error is, in fact, not an error once we have examined it more closely. In the end, it is perfectly reasonable to say that we do not have an answer for every question we may have, though we may as we learn more, or when we are in the Kingdom of God and get the final word on everything. We encourage the kind of humility that assumes that, when we fail to understand or if even initially disagree with a scripture, it is us, not the Bible, that is in error. This is essential to true Christian study.

A key point to remember is that self-testimony is valid and strong when that testimony is validated by sufficient evidence. The remarkable accuracy of the Bible in areas where we can check it gives us confidence that it is true in all areas.

A telling example of the Bible's accuracy is in the transliteration of the names of foreign kings in the Old Testament as compared to contemporary extra-biblical records, such as monuments and tablets. The Bible is accurate in every detail in the thirty-six instances of comparison, a total of 183 syllables. To see how amazing this is, Manetho's ancient work on the dynasties of the Egyptian kings can be compared to extra-biblical records in 140 instances. He is right forty-nine times, only partially right twenty-eight times, and in the other sixty-three cases not a single syllable is correct! The Bible's accuracy is shown not only in the original work but in its copies as well. By comparison,

Luke correctly identifies by name, title, job, and time such historical individuals as Annas, (Acts 4:6, 23:2) Ananias, Herod Agrippa I, Herod Agrippa II, Sergius Paulus, the Egyptian prophet, and governors Felix and Festus. Political titles were very diverse and difficult to keep straight since every province had its own terms and, worse yet, the terms constantly changed. Yet Luke gets them right: a proconsul in Cypress and Achaia, the undeserved title Praetor in Philippi, the otherwise unknown title of Politarchs in Thessalonica, Asiarchs in Ephesus, and "the chief man" in Malta. (Acts 28:7). The descriptions of local custom and culture are equally accurate.

In the late 19th and early 20th century a group of scholars sought to find errors in the scriptures that would prove them untrustworthy. This movement was called "Higher Criticism." One example of their work is the single mention of King Sargon of Assyria (Isaiah 20:1). Nineveh, the capital city, had been searched extensively by archeologists and no mention of a king Sargon was found. Those scholars jumped on this fact as proof that there never was a king Sargon in ancient Assyria. This was proof that he was only a figment of Isaiah's imagination and therefore the scriptures could not be trusted. A few years later archeologists from the University of Chicago discovered Sargon's palace in a town 12 miles north of Nineveh. You can see artifacts from this discovery in the Oriental Institute in Chicago. The University of Chicago played a major role in the archeology of the Middle East. I'm sure that you would find a visit to that Institute very interesting.

As John Elder states: "It is not too much to say that it was the rise of the science of archaeology that broke the deadlock between historians and Christianity. Little by little, one city after another, one civilization after another, one culture after another, whose memories were enshrined only in the Bible, were restored to their proper places in ancient history by the studies of archaeologists. . . . Contemporary records of biblical events have been unearthed and the uniqueness of biblical revelation has been emphasized by contrast and comparison to newly discovered religions of ancient peoples. Nowhere has archaeological discovery refuted the Bible as history."

This affirmation of the truthfulness of the Bible is exactly the attitude of Jesus himself. Frederick C. Grant, who is not any sort of fundamentalist Christian, acknowledges that the New Testament consistently takes "for granted that what is written in Scripture is trustworthy, infallible and inerrant. No New Testament writer would ever dream of questioning a statement contained in the Old Testament."

Those parts of the Old Testament that are most commonly rejected as error are also those sections of Scripture that Jesus clearly taught. This includes creation, the literalness of Genesis 1 and 2, Cain and the murder of Abel, Noah and the flood, Abraham, Sodom and Gomorrah, Lot, Isaac and Jacob, the manna, the wilderness serpent, Moses as lawgiver, the popularity of the false prophets, and Jonah in the belly of a whale.

In matters of controversy, Jesus used the Old Testament as his court of appeals. On many occasions where an Old Testament teaching was questioned, Jesus simply believed the clear teaching of Old Testament Scripture and defended himself by saying, *"it is written."*

Some of the most common critiques launched at the Old Testament are in regard to authorship, but Jesus actually named the authors of some Old Testament books. For example, many Old Testament "scholars" boldly claim that Moses did not pen any of the first five books of the Bible, or that two or three authors penned Isaiah, none of whom was actually Isaiah. But Jesus taught that Scripture was authored by Moses, Isaiah, David, and Daniel.

Following Jesus' example, while the New Testament authors often refer to the Old Testament in a rather general way, they also feel confident to appeal to the smallest detail. In Matthew 22:29–33, Jesus' argument rests on the present tense of *"to be"* in Exodus 3:6. Matthew 22:41–46 refers to the use of *"Lord"* in Psalm 110:1. In John 10:34, Jesus' argument comes from the Old Testament use of the word *"gods."* Also, Galatians 3:16 rests on the singularity of the Old Testament word translated *"seed"* or *"offspring."*

The standard for true prophecy was complete truthfulness, which is why Elijah was affirmed as a prophet: *"Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the LORD in your mouth is truth."*(1 Kings 17:24) Can the standard for the Bible be any less, if it is truly prophetic?

Since Scripture is God speaking to us because he wants us to understand, we also believe Scripture usually speaks accurately in ordinary language. Typically the writers use popular language rather than technical terminology. So they say, *"the sun had risen"* (Gen. 19:23), or refer to *"the four corners of the earth."*(Isa. 11:12) There are figures of speech like *"the trees of the field shall clap their hands."* (Isa. 55:12). There are also summaries, such as the Sermon on the Mount and Peter's sermon at Pentecost, which we do not have full transcriptions of, but only a portion of what was probably preached. Sometimes the Bible also gives us rounded numbers rather than exact head counts. For example, the number of men killed each day during a war. To interpret the Bible accurately we must consider it carefully. We interpret historical accounts, figures of speech, approximations, summaries, and such according to the author's intent, taking care unless our cultural and personal presuppositions distort our interpretation.

This does not mean there are no questions to explore. My biggest question revolves around the numbers in Numbers. Compared to archaeological estimates, they are too big by a factor of ten. There are several proposals for what is going on, but at this point, we don't know. A few decades ago, I also had questions about Jericho. According to the best archaeological reports, it was uninhabited from about 1600 BC to about 1200 BC. The Bible says the walls came tumbling down about 1440 BC. That would be hard if the city was already destroyed. But as excavations were done in a different part of the ancient site, a thick layer of ash containing grain was discovered. Dating by three different methods showed a burn date of (try to guess before you look!)—1440 BC.

Can I Trust That My Bible is God's Word?

Yes. If you have a good modern translation of the Bible, then you have *almost* exactly what the ancient authors wrote. Add stuff here re translation difficulties .

It is amazing that people try to argue that we cannot trust the Bible because we do not have the original copies. But it would never occur to them to question the writings of Plato, Sophocles, Homer, or Caesar Augustus, when we have fewer than ten copies of each book, and those copies were made at least one thousand years after the author wrote the original.

Until the middle of the twentieth century, the situation was similar with the Hebrew Old Testament. Our oldest copies dated from about AD 900. We knew the extreme care the rabbis used to copy the sacred text before they destroyed the worn one. But still, the copies we had were historically distant from the original (called the autographa). But then in 1947 the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered at Qumran. Suddenly we had copies of much of the Old Testament that were more than a thousand years older than our previous oldest copies.

A comparison of the Qumran manuscript of Isaiah with the Masoretic text from AD 900 showed the most minor variations, mostly spelling (like the American honor and the British honour) or stylistic changes such as adding a conjunction. Checking the pivotal text of Isaiah 53, we find that out of the 166 words in that chapter, only one word is really in question, and it does not at all change the meaning of the passage. The Qumran text added the word “light” after “he shall see” in verse 11. It’s a word that was implied, but not actually written. Our confidence in the text was confirmed.

In the case of the New Testament, we have 14,000 ancient copies, with fragments written no later than one hundred years after the original books and letters. This is truly amazing because the Bible was copied onto fragile materials like papyrus. The copies weren’t stored anywhere that protected them from the elements, but in God’s providence they still survived.

As we compare copies of both Old and New Testament we do find variations, but most of the variations in the many handwritten copies involve spelling, word order, or style. We would expect such minor human error no matter how careful the scribes were. Less than 1 percent of all the variations have anything to do with doctrine, and no doctrine is affected by any variation.

Lastly, Jesus himself used copies and translations. He trusted them, so we should too, especially when the science of textual criticism has confirmed that our text is accurate. Because we have so many manuscripts to check, we are virtually certain that the text of over 99 percent of the Bible we have is faithful to the original manuscripts.

Can Scripture Be Written Today?

No. The only people who could write Scripture were prophets and apostles—people who were witnesses of God’s revelation in Jesus, or authors like Luke who based his Gospel on eyewitness testimony and on the report of the apostles who were eyewitnesses.

Books of the Bible cannot be written today for two primary reasons.

First, the Old Testament ended with the prophet Malachi promising that the next major event in redemptive history would be the coming of John the Baptist, who would prepare the way for Jesus. There were then four hundred years of silence in which no book of the Bible was written until John came, as promised.

Likewise, the New Testament ends with its final book, Revelation, telling us that no other books of the Bible are to be written after it, and that we will again have silence until Jesus comes for the second time. Today, we are like God's people in the days between Malachi's promise and Jesus' coming. We are in a season of long silence where we know the future but are awaiting its coming. For this reason we do not need any more information, but rather, the fulfillment of the promises we have already received.

Second, the Bible tells us that Jesus is God's final word to us and that we should not add anything to the Bible. Furthermore, we have no need for any new book of the Bible because we already have all we need for faith and godliness. If there were some knowledge that we desperately needed, God would certainly not have waited some two thousand years to reveal it while His people sat in the darkness of partial knowledge. Our way of saying this is that the canon of Scripture is closed. No books, not even a word, will be added to the Bible. John's warning at the end of Revelation applies to the Bible as a whole: "*I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.*"

This does not mean that God's special revelation has ceased. God still speaks to people and groups, albeit not in apostolic, inspired, revelation. Examples include such things as predictive prophecies, dreams, visions, angelic visits, and the like that are spoken of by the Scripture itself..

In dealing with any alleged extra-biblical revelation, we must follow the biblical cautions. We must be neither gullible nor skeptical. On one hand, we must "not despise prophecies," but on the other, we must *"test everything; hold fast what is good."* (1 Thess. 5:20-21) John echoes Paul, saying, *"Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world."* We must follow the biblical guidelines for testing those who prophesy or allege other forms of extra-biblical revelation:

- Do they love God?
- Is their word consistent with the Bible?
- Is what they describe or predict accurate?
- Is their character Christ like?
- Does their word build up and encourage the church in truth? (1 Cor.14:3)
- Do the church elders affirm or confirm their word? (1Cor. 14:29)

Why is Scripture Authoritative?

Holy Scripture is God speaking. That simple but profound statement is why Christians believe that Scripture is our highest authority by which all other lesser authorities are tested. This means that lesser courts of reason, tradition, and culture are under the highest court of truth, which is Godly inspired

Scripture. By contrast, the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches teach that Scripture is a part of the larger pool of revelation that the church uses in its teaching. The authority is not in the Bible itself, but in the teaching office of the church.

Others appeal to the so-called Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Wesley believed that the living core of the Christian faith was revealed in Scripture, illumined by tradition, vivified in personal experience, and confirmed by reason. Scripture [however] is primary, revealing the Word of God "so far as it is necessary for our salvation."

In practice, though, the Bible often becomes just one of four major sources of authority to be balanced. When contemporary critical theories of the Bible start to be taken seriously, the Bible often is judged by other authorities.

The central development of the Protestant Reformation was the return to Scripture as supreme authority. The Reformers coined the slogan *sola Scriptura* (sometimes prima Scriptura) to summarize this conviction. Nothing judges Scripture. It judges everything else. As followers of Jesus, we take the same stance he did and receive the Bible alone as infallible, inerrant truth from God with full authority in our lives.

The Bible is a living book of God authoritatively speaking as a perfect Father to children he dearly loves. The Bible tells us how to live godly lives. For example, it commands us to "put away falsehood" and "speak the truth with [our] neighbor," not as arbitrary rules of conduct but as church family members who are "members one of another."(Ephesians 4:25) It is a story of what is best in a loving family, a family we are invited to be a part of, a family leaving sin and dysfunction and growing to maturity and fulfillment. It is the story of the God of redemption rescuing us from rebellion, brokenness, sin, and death. Its authority is that in these inspired words we find the way to connect with the forgiving and transforming power of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Is the Bible Sufficient or All I Need for Life with God?

The Protestant Reformers' slogan *sola Scriptura* means that Scripture alone is our court of highest authority. This should not be confused with *solo Scriptura*, which is the erroneous belief that truth is to be found only in Scripture and nowhere else. Scripture itself speaks of lesser courts of lower authority that Christians should obey: we should submit to the authority of pastors, government, and parents up to the limits of disobeying the highest authority of Scripture.

The Bible itself models the fact that there is at least some truth outside of the Bible when it occasionally quotes other books, such as the book of Jashar (Joshua 10:13, 2 Samuel 1:18) and the Book of the Wars of the LORD (Numbers21:14). In quoting them, the Bible is not saying that they should be included as sacred

Scripture, but rather, that they do contain some helpful truth. Practically speaking this means that a mechanic, doctor, or computer programmer does not have to consult Leviticus to turn a brake drum, perform open-heart surgery, or make an addition to a software program.

Regarding the sufficiency of Scripture, the Bible and the Bible alone, teaches a complete Christian worldview that includes what we need to know about God, how to come into relation with him, who Jesus is and what he did for our salvation, and what will happen at the end of history.

Why Different Translations of Scripture?

For centuries the Eastern Church had the Bible only in Greek. The Western church had the Bible only in Latin. Since most people were not fluent in these languages, they were unable to read the Bible themselves. One of the great developments of the Protestant Reformation was to return the Bible to the people of the church. The Reformers wanted the people to have the Bible in their own language. Martin Luther and John Wycliffe are just two of the men who risked their lives to translate the Bible into German and English. William Tyndale was charged with heresy and condemned to death because he translated the Bible into English. According to Foxe's Book of Martyrs, he "was tied to the stake, strangled by the hangman, and afterwards consumed with fire," simply because he wanted people to be able to read the Bible.

Today many translations of the Bible are available. At least part of the Bible has been translated into at least 2,454 languages. At least one of the two Testaments exists in at least 1,168 languages, and the full Bible is available in at least 438 languages. During the past four centuries there have been hundreds of English Bible translations, and dozens are actively used today. They fall into three major categories:

1. Word-for-word translations (also known as formal equivalence translations) emphasize the patterns of the words and seek "as far as possible to capture the precise wording of the original text and the personal style of each Bible writer. It seeks to be transparent to the original text, letting the reader see as directly as possible the structure and meaning of the original." The result is a striving for the precision of what the Bible says, much like one would expect in other important communications, such as legal documents, marriage vows, or contracts.

Word-for-word translations have advantages for studying because of their closeness to the original, though they sometimes become a bit formal stylistically because the biblical languages use different patterns of grammar and expression from English. The best contemporary word-for-word translation is the English Standard Version (ESV). The King James Version (KJV) is also a word-for-word translation, and remains the best-selling English translation. It sounds very reverent to many people, but it is difficult for some people to read because it uses old English. Other good word-for-word translations in modern English include the New King James Version (NKJV) and the New American Standard Bible (NASB).

2. Thought-for-thought translations (also known as dynamic equivalence or functional equivalence) attempt to convey the full nuance of each passage by interpreting the Scripture's entire meaning and not just the individual words. Such versions seek to find the best modern cultural equivalent that will have the same effect the original message had in its ancient cultures. My favorite thought-for-thought modern English translation, the New International Version (NIV), is also the most popular. Others include the New Living Translation (NLT) and the Contemporary English Version (CEV).

3. Paraphrased translations put the emphasis on readability in English. Therefore, they pay even less attention to specific word patterns in an attempt to capture the poetic or narrative essence of a passage. Examples of paraphrased translations include The Message (MESSAGE), The Living Bible (TLB), and The Amplified Bible (AMP).

All faithful translations try to achieve a balance of four elements:

1. Accuracy to the original text as much as possible.

2. Beauty of language.

3. Clarity of meaning.

4. Dignity of style.

While some translations are better than others, it is important to note that translations have various strengths and weaknesses and that the student of Scripture benefits from enjoying multiple translations. Furthermore, rather than fighting over translations, Christians should praise God for every good translation and trust God to use them to transform our lives as we enjoy them.

Nonetheless, we would encourage you to use the NASB or another good word-for-word translation as your primary study tool, while also using other translations as secondary resources for your studies. While Christians should enjoy multiple good translations, they must be careful of corruptions. Corruptions are "translations" of Scripture that clearly seek to undermine the very teaching of Scripture. These translations are very poor and should not be used as credible translations for study. Every translation runs the risk of reflecting the preconceived ideas of the translator. This is why it's so important to study rather than just read your Bible. This is why the Apostle Paul encourages Timothy to *"study"* (KJV) , *"Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth."* (2 Tim. 2:15 NIV).

How Can We Best Interpret Scripture?

The very best way to interpret the Bible is to read it. Many people find the Bible hard to understand because they have never really taken the time to carefully, prayerfully, and frequently read it. Therefore, you will be well served to read it in large portions as a single story that reveals God.

The easiest place to start is by reading one of the Gospels about Jesus Christ, as you would any other true story. To start, as you read it, be looking for the message of the story as a whole without getting too sidetracked with the specifics of each verse. You will discover that the Gospel of Jesus' life are a continuation of the entirety of the story of Scripture. You will want go back and read Genesis to get the first episode. You'll see how God created a beautiful place for him to live with humans, how we ruined that world through sin, and how God began his rescue mission to save his sin-marred world. From there you can continue reading the rest of the Bible to discover the rest of the story.

As you read the Bible, you will have questions about particular sections. As you seek to understand Scripture you will be doing interpretation. To help you, we recommend a four-step process for interpreting the Bible.

The first question to ask is, **what does the Scripture actually say?** God wants to speak to you through the Bible. One error is to under-read the text, missing what is there through lack of attention. The opposite error is to over-read the text, putting preconceived opinions, ideas, or perspectives into the text, which is called *eisegesis*. Therefore, the goal is to humbly read the text to hear from God, which is called *exegesis*.

As you read Scripture, you will see that it comes in various literary types. One major type is *narrative*, texts that communicate by telling a story. This includes books such as Genesis, Samuel, and Matthew. A second is *poetry*, texts in which language is used for its aesthetics and evokes feeling as well as cognitive qualities. It communicates through structures and patterns to create an intellectual, emotional, and spiritual response through meaning, sound, and rhythm. This includes books such as Psalms and Proverbs as well as sections of books such as Genesis 15 and Romans 11:33–36. A third type is *discourse*, texts that communicate in a logical sequence of ideas. This includes books such as Romans, Hebrews, and Jude. Occasionally all three types of literature appear in one book. For example, Deuteronomy is mostly discourse, but chapter 32 is poetry and chapter 34 is narrative. To avoid error, it is vitally important to be aware of the type of literature you are reading and interpreting.

The second question is, **what does the Scripture mean?** In this step, you should look for what Scripture is teaching, especially in the original context. Much of the Bible was written to specific people in specific historical situations. The task is to discover that meaning and to understand the meaning of each text in its own terms, categories, and thought forms, beginning with the questions and issues the writer deals with, not the questions we bring. You will want to ask, what is the author trying to accomplish? What ideas or values is he trying to communicate? It is often helpful to write out your observations of the specifics of the text in a journal designated for personal Bible study.

The third question is, **what principle truths is this section of Scripture teaching that apply to all of God's people in all times and places?** There are many questions to ask to find the universal principle. Is the text describing an event or belief, or is it prescribing (commanding) a practice, precept, promise, or value? Sometimes the form of a command is time-bound, but the principle extends everywhere. For example, Paul's request to the Ephesians to pray for him is specific, but the principle applies to believers

praying for leaders in all times. Other times a culturally specific command can apply in broader terms. For example, when the Bible commands us to greet one another with a holy kiss it makes sense in some cultures, whereas in others the principle of greeting fellow Christians warmly is most appropriately followed with a handshake or a hug. To kiss someone would not communicate the same thing as it did in the culture the text was originally written to. Also, sometimes what is described in the Bible is a negative example because the Bible does record human sin as a warning to us. This means that just because the Bible records that David committed adultery and murder doesn't mean we should do it.

We do not believe that Christians can only do what the Bible commands. We believe that Christians should do everything the Bible commands, not do anything the Bible forbids, but, where the Bible is silent, work from biblical principles, conscience, wisdom, and godly counsel to determine what should or should not be done.

Because the meaning of the Bible is for the whole church, it is essential to read it in community. The wider the community the more likely we are to get the whole intended truth and nothing but the intended truth. It is important to include in our interpretive community Christians not only from other nations but also from other ages. Faithful brothers and sisters from church history can greatly help us see the Scriptures more clearly, as they do not have some of our cultural assumptions.

The fourth question is, **how should I respond to what God has said?** Here we are seeking to understand how the Bible's teaching applies to our life individually as Christians and corporately as a church today. The Bible shares content with an intended purpose expecting that we will respond with belief and in other ways, depending upon what it says. Sometimes we are told to repent of sin, obey God, and live according to God's command. Other times the intent of a passage is to comfort, strengthen, encourage, or build us up, and our response is to be a sense of courage, joy, or hope. In any case, we respond with our whole being, heart, soul, mind, and actions. This is exactly what James 1:22 exhorts, saying, "But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves."

How Does Our View of Scripture Affect Our Life?

God speaks to us through the Scriptures as a loving Father. We listen to what Scripture says, learn what it teaches, and make every effort by the Holy Spirit's empowering to repent of our sin, renew our minds, and redeem our lives.

Christians worship God, not the Bible. But the Bible informs us of who God is and how He is to be worshiped. Therefore it is essential to our worship. As a result, we come to the Bible for transformation, not just for information. As the same Holy Spirit who inspired the Scriptures illuminates our understanding we deeply enjoy our new life guided by our new wisdom of Scripture and our new power from the Holy Spirit. We are delighting in our new gift of repentance as part of God's kingdom people working together on mission in this world for Jesus.

Because Scripture is God speaking to us, we memorize, meditate, study, teach, and share His truth. Everything in life and ministry is guided by the truth of Scripture. Everything good is a result of the truth of biblical revelation being used by the Holy Spirit to change our lives so we look more like Jesus both individually as Christians and corporately as the church.

Every time we read the Bible, we hear God speaking. The Bible is the standard for all doctrine and teaching, faith and practice, life and holiness. We agree with the ancient Bereans, who tested all they learned *"with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so"* (Acts 17:11).

JOURNAL

Notes & Reflections

What stood out to you in this study? Write down questions, verses to look up, and what God is teaching you.