

## LESSON 3

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# How to Get the Most Out of Bible Study

Some have said that Christianity is a religion of the “book,” meaning the Bible. The Bible is unlike any other book, for it is inspired by God, explains who He is, tells what He has done, and reveals what He will do in the future. The Bible is often called the “Scriptures” or the “Word” or the “Word of God,” and it contains wisdom not found in any other book.

While you should love and reverence the Bible as God’s recorded message, you are not to worship the Bible. Worship the One who is the focus of attention in Scripture—Jesus Christ. He told the Jews of His day, “You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me” (John 5:39). Those Jews were thorough students of the Scriptures available at that time (the Old Testament), but sadly most missed the central message—that God would send a personal Savior to give His life for sinners.

Remember that eternal life is not in the printed page but imparted by the Spirit of God through faith in Christ. More than being a religion of the “book,” Christianity is about “Christ in you!”

The fact that God has left us His written Word is very significant. It is food meant to satisfy our spiritual hunger. Notice what Jesus says: “Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4). You will do well to spend time every day reading and meditating on the Bible. God will help you understand it as you devote time daily to learn from it and apply its wonderful truths to your life. Many Christian leaders recommend that Christians spend 15 to 30 minutes each day in the Word. You can do this! It may mean getting up a little earlier in the morning or cutting out some frivolous activity, but the results will be well worth it.

## LESSON OUTLINE

Interpreting the Bible  
Characteristics of the Bible  
How to Approach the Bible  
Figurative Language in the Bible  
Practical Tips for Studying Scripture

## LESSON OBJECTIVES

When you complete this lesson, you should be able to:

- 1: *Explain what it means to correctly interpret the Scriptures.*
- 2: *Identify six characteristics of the Bible.*
- 3: *List prerequisites for receiving from God's Word.*
- 4: *Distinguish between literal and figurative languages in the Bible.*
- 5: *Point out practical tips for studying Scripture.*

### Interpreting the Bible

#### **Objective 1:**

*Explain what it means to correctly interpret the Scriptures.*

One of the most important skills you will learn as a Christian is how to correctly interpret God's Word. The apostle Paul advised, "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 Timothy 2:15). Stepping into the world of Scripture is like visiting a foreign country. You immediately find new words, strange customs, and unfamiliar expressions—expressions like ephahs and

homers, a bruised reed and smoking flax, a brazen laver and cherubim. And what does it mean to “sit in the gate” or to “cast lots”?

The cultures of the people of the Bible were very different from yours. You might think of Bible interpretation as building a bridge between our modern world and the Bible world. To interpret the Bible correctly, you must ask three basic questions: 1) What does the text say? 2) What did it mean to the people who first heard it? 3) What does it mean to us today?

In 2 Timothy 2:15, the Greek word translated “correctly handle” literally means “to cut straight.” Let me illustrate this idea with two examples. In biblical times, a man using a plow needed to cut a straight furrow. The apostle Paul was a tentmaker by trade. Tents were made with animal skins. In order to match the animal skins, each skin had to be cut in a “straight” line. Hence, Paul was comparing interpreting the Scripture to cutting a straight line. You “cut a straight line” with Scripture by matching verses and thoughts that go together. When you “cut straight,” you will find that Scripture agrees with Scripture.

## Characteristics of the Bible

### *Objective 2:*

*Identify six characteristics of the Bible.*

### The Bible is inspired by God (2 Timothy 3:16).

The Bible is God’s revelation of himself to humans. It is not man’s opinions about God. God made himself known by speaking through the biblical authors such as the ancient prophets and the apostles of Christ. However, do not think that because the Bible is old it is irrelevant to us in the twenty-first century. Just as we still breathe the same air that has been around for millennia, God’s message is as pertinent today as it ever was.

### The Bible is without error in its original manuscripts (Deuteronomy 32:4).

The Bible you own is actually a translation of the sacred writings of special people God used to share His message. You can trust the historical accuracy of the Bible. It needs no correction. Bible translators make every effort to make sure their translation is as close to the original manuscripts as possible.

### The Bible speaks with absolute authority.

When you read the Bible, you are listening as God speaks to you. Therefore you must submit yourself to Scripture's teachings. It has been said that those who reject the authority of Scripture do not do so because God's Word is full of contradictions; rather they reject the Bible because it contradicts them!

### The Bible is in unity.

Even though the Bible is composed of 66 books, written by over 40 individuals over the course of hundreds of years, it contains one basic message from beginning to end. That message is the story of God reconciling (making peace) humankind to himself through Jesus Christ. All Scripture relates to that one theme.

### The Bible is clear.

Though parts of the Bible are hard to grasp without the help of the Holy Spirit and teachers (Acts 8:30–31), the central message of the Bible can be known by anyone of average intelligence. There are no secret codes to unlock the purpose of Scripture, so one does not need to be an expert theologian to benefit from studying the Bible.

### The Bible is practical.

The Bible is practical; you can apply it to life. For example, the book of Esther is not meant to teach merely Persian history. It tells us of God's care and guidance of His people. The guidelines in the Bible will help you live a happy and productive life.

## How to Approach the Bible

### *Objective 3:*

*List prerequisites for learning from God's Word.*

I hope you are excited about learning from God's Word. Here are three prerequisites for receiving spiritual nourishment from the Bible.

#### You must believe the Scriptures are the Word of God.

To correctly handle the Scriptures, you must receive the Bible as it is: God's word of truth, God's marvelous revelation to humanity. This requires faith based on facts. The Bible is accurate when it refers to historical people, places, and events. Archeological evidence supports the details recorded in Scripture. All the data eventually point to Jesus who lived, died, and rose from the dead—one of the best supported truths of history. No church teaching, man-made creed, or preacher takes priority over the Scriptures.

#### You must ask God to give you wisdom and revelation.

To unbelievers, the Bible can seem almost impossible to comprehend. But to God's children who diligently pray for understanding, God gives insight. Notice these words taken from the Bible: "None of the wicked will understand, but those who are wise will understand" (Daniel 12:10). One day the apostle Peter confessed his conviction that Jesus Christ was no mere mortal man but God's divine Son. Jesus responded, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven" (Matthew 16:17). As God's Holy Spirit gives you the wisdom to grasp scriptural truth, the amazing wisdom and power of the message of the Bible will impact your life.

#### You must eagerly search for the truth of the Scriptures.

To truly appreciate the deep truths of Scripture, you must eagerly search for them. God does not reward laziness and indifference. Rather, He blesses diligence

and effort when it comes to seeking Him. We are called to grow in grace and the knowledge of God; this takes place only as we dig into the Bible, God's Word.

## Figurative Language in the Bible

### *Objective 4:*

*Distinguish between literal and figurative languages in the Bible.*

In every culture and nation, people use both literal and figurative languages to communicate. For instance, when English speakers say "It is raining cats and dogs," they mean that rain is falling heavily. A Chinese person who understood some English and heard this phrase for the first time may not understand that this was a figurative expression. Someone would have to teach that listener the true meaning of the expression.

In similar ways, the human writers God used to pen the words of the Bible employed both literal and figurative languages to convey their message. Consider Jesus' method of teaching. He lived in a culture that loved to tell stories, so He often conveyed His message with stories and figures of speech. He did so purposely to make strong impressions on the hearts of the listeners. Jesus preached not only to the minds of His listeners, but also to their wills and emotions. Stories and figures of speech bypass the mind and aim at the emotions. Emotions in turn affect the will. Thus, philosophical arguments do not convince as well as emotionally powerful stories. Let us look at common figures of speech found in Scripture.

### Hyperbole

The word *hyperbole* may be new to you, but it has a simple meaning. A hyperbole is an exaggeration of something to produce a certain effect. You might be thinking, then, that exaggeration is a form of lying. However, exaggeration is a form of lying only if its intent

is to deceive the listener. It is not deceptive to use hyperbole to convey truth.

Jesus was a master of hyperbole. He spoke of camels going through the eyes of needles and mountains being thrown into the sea. In Matthew 23:24, Jesus rebuked the Pharisees: “You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.” The real meaning of that rebuke is, “You pay close attention to little things but neglect the important things.” Another example is Matthew 5:29: “If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away.” This is an obvious exaggeration to teach the importance of avoiding anything that causes one to fall into sin. Jesus also said, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26). Does this mean that we must literally hate our closest relatives? Of course not! Jesus was simply stressing that our love for Him must be supreme.

### Simile

A simile is a clearly expressed comparison between two unlike things introduced by the conjunction *as* or *like*. Here is a biblical simile: “If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it will obey you” (Luke 17:6). Similes and parables are related. When a simile is expanded into a story, the result is a parable.

### Metaphor

A metaphor is a comparison between two unlike things that is not clearly expressed by conjunctions. Here is an example: “You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men” (Matthew 5:13).

### Proverb

A proverb is a memorable, one-sentence statement that expresses an important bit of wisdom. Matthew 6:21

is such an example: “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

## Riddle

Riddles are puzzling sayings. Mark records one such saying: “We heard him say, ‘I will destroy this man-made temple and in three days will build another, not made by man’” (Mark 14:58).

## Parable

A parable is an expanded simile or metaphor, for example, “The kingdom of God is like” [followed by a story or parable]. Over one-third of Jesus’ words recorded in the gospels are parables. More examples of parables include “The Good Samaritan”, “The Four Soils”, and the “Prodigal (Lost) Son.”

Be careful not to get overly caught up in the details of a parable. Do not assign a different meaning to each element of the story. Parables are simple stories told to make one basic point and to call for a response from the listeners. The parables of Jesus were not meant to teach doctrine as such but to call forth a response. Understanding a parable is like “getting” a joke. The two things that make a joke funny to its hearers are the familiar points of reference and the unexpected turn in the story. If you pay too much attention to the details, you lose the punch line.

There are many other kinds of figures of speech in the Bible. Students of the Bible need to become familiar with these. So how can you know when something in the Bible should be taken literally or figuratively? A good rule of thumb (that is a figure of speech!) is to, first, read the text literally. If it does not make sense literally, then the text is possibly figurative. In that case, look for the essential truth being presented. Bear in mind that it may not be easy for the first-time reader of Scripture to determine the difference between a literal statement and certain figures of speech. However, diligence in study will be amply rewarded as you grow in your understanding of the events and teachings of God’s Word.



## Practical Tips for Studying Scripture

### *Objective 5:*

*Point out practical tips for studying Scripture.*

#### **Aim to know God**

Make the purpose of your Bible study to get to know God and His Son, Jesus Christ. You do not earn points for simply knowing a lot about the Bible or for reading it a certain number of times. The goal is to see Jesus throughout the pages of the Bible and respond to Him.

#### **Be open to new thoughts and concepts**

Read the Scriptures loosely. By that, I mean read without initially forming any rigid opinions about what the Bible says and means. Do not try to fit verses into your preconceived notions about what God is like and the way the world operates. Lean on the leading of the Holy Spirit, and everything will fall into place. Absorb God's Word, and the Spirit will highlight what you need to understand.

#### **Be patient**

If verses seem to conflict with or contradict one another, do not automatically assume that the problem is inherent in the Bible and irresolvable. There is no cause for alarm or abandoning the faith! It may be that you have not read enough and retained enough of the Bible to see how one or more verses fit into the whole. Your understanding of the verses in question could be flawed.

For example, a person who knows little or nothing about auto mechanics may look at the engine of his or her car with a sense of great mystery. He or she may have absolutely no clue how one piece of the motor relates to the others. It may even look like one odd-looking part is useless and does nothing. However, a trained mechanic understands that each piece of the motor was engineered with a purpose. It is not there by accident.

It is the same with the verses in God's Word. Each one is there with divine purpose. As you trust in God's

Spirit to open your spiritual eyes, you will grow in understanding. If you do not understand something right away, do not be afraid to put it on the shelf for a while. The study of Scripture is a lifetime pursuit, and frankly some things do not become clear until after many years.

It might help you to know that in almost all cases, the so-called problematic verses you will come across can be harmonized by carefully compiling and comparing the data. It is not usually an either/or issue but a both/and issue. You can also purchase books by Christian scholars who have compiled and compared the data and resolved most of these difficulties. A very small number of problems with the biblical text are the result of poor translating or copying, and these too can be identified. However, none of the so-called problematic verses affect Christian doctrine (beliefs) in any way.

### Pray

Ask God for understanding. This is vital because merely reading the Word is not enough. You must understand it in order to obey and act in faith upon it. Obedience and faith will release God's supernatural blessings and produce the fruit of the Spirit in your life. Jesus promised to send us the Holy Spirit who would lead us into all truth (see John 16:13).

### Be cautious

As a growing Christian, you will be exposed to many interesting ideas from people around you, including fellow believers. Do not automatically accept when people tell you their latest revelation from God's Word. Check it out yourself with the Bible. See if what you hear lines up with God's Word. Seek God with all your heart to get His understanding of the Bible, not someone else's interpretation.

Also, do not believe a particular interpretation just because it is unusual. Sadly, some Christians are gullible and naïve. They do not correctly handle the Word of God and are particularly attracted to odd ideas. They may even feel that the stranger the idea, the more spiritual

it must be. Just because something is unusual does not make it true. In most cases, your interpretation of Scripture verses will make logical sense.

### Maintain purity in your life

Make sure your heart is pure before God. If you store hatred, revenge, jealousy, bitterness, prejudice and envy in your heart, those things will negatively influence your ability to learn from the Bible. Sinful attitudes will distort your concept of God, others, and yourself.

### Avoid pride

Over time as you gain more knowledge of God's Word and become wiser in His ways, watch out lest an attitude of superiority develops. Read 1 Corinthians 13 from time to time. This chapter talks about the supremacy of love in the Christian life.

### Become familiar with common symbols used in Scripture

Some ordinary things are often used symbolically in Scripture to convey spiritual truth. For instance, the lamb often represents Christ; the human body sometimes represents the church, the sea can refer to the Gentile nations; the number "seven" represents perfection or completion. The number "twelve" has special significance; for instance, there were twelve ancient tribes of Israel and twelve apostles chosen by Christ.

### Look at the context

To study in context means to read the verses surrounding a particular text. Do not let a verse hang by itself. You may even want to read the verse in the context of the whole chapter or book in which it is found. Also, put the Scripture into its proper historical and cultural setting. Ask yourself how you would have reacted to what was said had you lived in that time. Reading in context is vital, for unscrupulous people have invented many strange and dangerous false doctrines simply because they pulled a verse out of context.

## Learn to use various translations of the Bible

Fortunately, we live at a time when you can buy various translations of the Bible into major languages. For instance, there are many excellent translations of the Bible into English. These translations are all made from the same ancient manuscripts in Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic, but one version may translate a word or sentence a little differently from another. Some translations are very literal and perhaps somewhat difficult to follow in your language while others try to convey not so much exact words but the thoughts communicated by the original manuscripts. When studying a Bible text, compare two or three reliable Bible translations to get a fuller idea of what the original author was saying.

## Learn to identify different kinds of biblical literature

The Bible contains history, poetry, prophecy, parables, proverbs, and other kinds of literature. The kind or genre of literature affects how you should interpret a particular verse. For instance, you should not typically read poetry literally; instead look for the underlying meaning and truth. Do not treat proverbs like prophecies, expecting them to find literal fulfillment in every situation. To illustrate, Proverbs 22:29 says, “Do you see a man skilled in his work? He will serve before kings; he will not serve before obscure men.” Does this mean that every skilled person will always work in a high profile position and receive the accolades of very powerful leaders? Not necessarily. The proverb in question teaches that skill generally brings recognition and advancement, but there are exceptions. A highly skilled Christian in a Muslim country may be denied advancement because of his allegiance to Jesus Christ.

## **Conclusion**

I trust you have enjoyed this lesson and are now eager to be a lifelong learner and student of the Bible. Here are some final thoughts for you. Come to God’s written Word with an open heart. Do not assume you already know what the Bible says. Pray for God’s will, not your

will, to be done. Then will the Bible become an open door for you to fellowship with the Lord. The Holy Spirit will shine a light on truths that you have never seen before. Remember, God reveals wisdom and knowledge to the one who is humble and hungry for truth.

### **SUGGESTED SCRIPTURES TO MEMORIZE**

Matthew 13:44

Matthew 16:17

John 5:39

John 6:63

Acts 17:11

1 Corinthians 2:13–14

1 Corinthians 10:11

2 Timothy 2:15

2 Timothy 3:16

1 Peter 1:20

1 John 2:27

## SELF-TEST

After studying the lesson, please read each study question carefully and circle the correct response. There is only one correct response for each question.

- The Bible is*
  - to be worshipped.*
  - God's inspired Word.*
  - merely fiction.*
- Bible interpretation is like*
  - visiting a foreign country.*
  - making tents.*
  - building a bridge.*
- When we say that the Bible has one message from beginning to end, we mean it is*
  - inspired.*
  - without error.*
  - in unity.*
- The Christian faith is based on facts.*
  - True*
  - False*
- Choose the statement that is incorrect.*
  - Hyperbole means to exaggerate something to produce a certain effect.*
  - A proverb is a memorable statement that expresses an important bit of wisdom.*
  - A metaphor is comparison of two like things introduced by the conjunction as or like.*
- Understanding a parable is likened to understanding*
  - a joke.*
  - deep theology.*
  - all the details of the parable.*
- It is important to be patient as you study Scripture because*
  - God intends to confuse you as you study.*
  - understanding the Bible is a lifelong process.*
  - it contains many mysteries no one understands.*

8. *Identify a good reason to use caution when exposed to unusual interpretations of biblical verses.*
  - a) *Unusual interpretations are usually the most accurate.*
  - b) *Unusual interpretations are generally the most spiritual.*
  - c) *Some people do not correctly handle the Word of God and are attracted to odd ideas with no firm biblical foundation.*
9. *If you really want to understand God's Word, you must*
  - a) *know more about it than your pastor.*
  - b) *have the heart of your heavenly Father.*
  - c) *stick to one translation.*
10. *The Bible contains*
  - a) *different kinds of literature that require particular ways of interpreting them.*
  - b) *only one genre of literature.*
  - c) *only ancient poetry and history.*

## ANSWERS TO SELF-TEST

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Note: If you answered a study question incorrectly, you can find the objective it was drawn from by looking at the reference in parentheses.

1. *b* (3.2)
2. *c* (3.1)
3. *c* (3.2)
4. *a* (3.3)
5. *c* (3.4)
6. *a* (3.4)
7. *b* (3.5)
8. *c* (3.5)
9. *b* (3.5)
10. *a* (3.5)

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THIS LESSON

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