

Understanding the Bible

[Proverbs 2:1-5](#)



Next week we will be starting the book of Acts. But before we do I want to talk this morning about “Understanding the Bible.” I’m sure that you are aware that that is not a simple thing to do. All you have to do is look around at all the different churches with all their different beliefs, which they say come from the Bible, and it is easy to see that understanding the Bible is not that easy.

There are good and godly men who disagree about every doctrine the Bible teaches. Some read the Bible and end up [Arminians](#) and others read the same Bible and are Calvinists. Some study Scripture and are [Charismatics](#), others study the same Scripture and are not charismatic. When it comes to the subject of eschatology, the end times, we have [dispensationalists](#) some of whom are pre-trib, mid-trib, or post trib. We also have [premillennialists](#), [postmillennialists](#) and [amillennialists](#). Then we have partial preterists and preterists. Wow! They all read the same Bible and yet they see things so differently. This should tell us that understanding the Bible is not a simple task.



If we are going to understand the Bible, we must have some understanding of [Hermeneutics](#). *Hermeneutics is the science of biblical interpretation.* The purpose of hermeneutics is to establish guidelines and rules for interpreting the Bible. Any written document is subject to misinterpretation, and thus we have developed rules to safeguard us from such misunderstanding.

God has spoken, and what He has said is recorded in Scripture. The basic need of hermeneutics is to ascertain what God meant by what He said. For example:

"But I say to you, do not resist him who is evil; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also. ⁴⁰ "And if anyone wants to sue you, and take your shirt, let him have your coat also. ⁴¹ "And whoever shall force you to go one mile, go with him two. ⁴² "Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you. (Matthew 5:39-42 NASB)

Is this to be taken literally? This is an important question, is it not? So, what do you think are these commands to be taken literally? If you say, "Yes, these are to be taken literally" then I'm going to ask you for your car keys. Jesus said, ***"Give to him who asks you"***. So, I'm asking you to give me your car keys. If you take this literally, then you must give me your car keys. Do you see the problem here? So how do we know if these verses are to be taken literally or not? Good question, I'm glad you asked. We all know what Jesus said. The important question is, "What did he mean by what he said?" How do we determine that? We are to determine what the Bible means by the use of Hermeneutics.

Now we don't have time to go through all the principles of hermeneutics but I want to deal with two of them that I feel are not well understood and are critical to a proper understanding of Scripture.

The primary rule of hermeneutics is called: [The Analogy of Faith](#) — this means that Scripture interprets Scripture. No part of Scripture can be interpreted in such a way as to render it in conflict with what is clearly taught elsewhere in Scripture. The analogy of faith is a safeguard that should help us from reading in to the scriptures something that is not there. If one scripture seems to contradict another, then we must turn to what is easily understood, and then continue digging until we have reconciled the apparent contradiction or difficult understanding. God is not the author of confusion, and I believe His word is adequately clear to show us the answers.

The Westminster Confession of Faith states that, *"The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture, is the Scripture itself; and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold,*

but one), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.”

Under the principle of the analogy of faith I want to bring up an aspect of this point that I have come to believe is vital in understanding the Bible. It is this: **The Bible is one book.** It is my opinion that the designation “Old Testament” is destructive. We think of something old as outdated, not needed any longer. When I get a new laptop I no longer want to use my “old” one. I think that most Christians have the idea that the “Old Testament” is not needed or useful for believers. This is due in part to confusing the Old Covenant which has been superseded by the New Covenant to the Old Testament. We connect the Old Covenant and the Old Testament and since the Old Covenant passed away we believe so has the Old Testament. The Old Covenant is fulfilled and we are under the New Covenant. But the First Testament is not “old.”

Please understand this; Apart from understanding the First Testament you will never completely understand the Second Testament. The writers of the Second Testament all suppose that their readers understood the First Testament. Look at Romans 1:

Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God,² which He promised beforehand through His prophets in the holy Scriptures, (Romans 1:1-2 NASB)

What is Paul saying here? He is saying that the gospel was promised in the First Testament. “Through His prophets in the holy Scriptures” is referring to the First Testament.

To understand the words of the Second Testament we must understand the words of the First Testament. For example the new believer begins to read their Bible and they start in Matthew:

The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. (Matthew 1:1 NASB)

In the first verse of the so called New Testament we have to ask: Who is David? Who is Abraham? Where do we get the answers to those questions? We have to go back to the First Testament.

Speaking of Mary Matthew writes:

"And she will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for it is He who will save His people from their sins." (Matthew 1:21 NASB)

Who are “His people”? Israel! Matthew then tells us that this was in fulfillment of prophecy from the First Testament:

Now all this took place that what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet might be fulfilled, saying, (Matthew 1:22 NASB)

Then he quotes from Isaiah:

"BEHOLD, THE VIRGIN SHALL BE WITH CHILD, AND SHALL BEAR A SON, AND THEY SHALL CALL HIS NAME IMMANUEL," which translated means, "GOD WITH US." (Matthew 1:23 NASB)

So the Virgin Mary giving birth to Jesus was foretold in the First Testament.

Then in chapter two it is said of Herod:

And gathering together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he began to inquire of them where the Christ was to be born.⁵ And they said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it has been

written by the prophet, (Matthew 2:4-5 NASB)

Then he quotes again from the First Testament, this time from Micah:

'AND YOU, BETHLEHEM, LAND OF JUDAH, ARE BY NO MEANS LEAST AMONG THE LEADERS OF JUDAH; FOR OUT OF YOU SHALL COME FORTH A RULER, WHO WILL SHEPHERD MY PEOPLE ISRAEL.' (Matthew 2:6 NASB)

So it seems like we can learn a lot about Jesus from the First Testament.

Then in verse 14 Matthew again uses the First Testament:

And he arose and took the Child and His mother by night, and departed for Egypt;¹⁵ and was there until the death of Herod, that what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet might be fulfilled, saying, "OUT OF EGYPT DID I CALL MY SON." (Matthew 2:14-15 NASB)

Let me make a couple of comments about this verse. Peter states:

for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God. (2 Peter 1:21 NASB)

God is the ultimate Author of the Bible, and this important truth has implications for how we understand it.

When Israel was a youth I loved him, And out of Egypt I called My son. (Hosea 11:1 NASB)

Who is the author of this passage? According to the first verse of Hosea it is the prophet by that name. But how can we know what his intention is in the passage? First, we know approximately when he lived. We also have the broader context of the whole book, which gives us a fuller idea of what Hosea intended to say in this one verse. When we study his text in the context of his entire book, we find that Hosea is referring to the Exodus described in the book of Exodus.

But as we have just seen in Matthew 2:15 the writer applies Hosea 11:1 to Jesus as a youth returning to Judea from Egypt. This reference does not seem in keeping with the intention of Hosea. It is here we must remember where the meaning of a text ultimately resides—in the intention of its Author, God Himself. And as we read the Scripture in the context of the Bible as a whole, we see that He has made an analogy between Israel, God's son, being freed from Egypt, and Jesus, God's Son, coming up from Egypt, a pattern that runs throughout Matthew's gospel. ***"Out of Egypt I have called my son"*** is Exodus typology, where Jesus is the New True Israel.

If we don't know the First Testament we'll never see this Exodus typology in Matthew. Let's briefly look at this typology; The setting for the New Testament story is the return to the desert or wilderness for Israel, and the 40 years between 30-70 A. D. can be directly compared to the original wilderness wandering of Old Covenant Israel.

Like Moses Jesus will grow up in Egypt. Like the story of Moses, Herod slaughters the male children ([Matt 2:16-18](#)). Like Moses' exile to Midian, Jesus' exile to Egypt will end with the death of Herod-Pharaoh. And then we have a New Exodus foretold: ***"Out of Egypt I have called my son"***.

Jesus is baptized ([Matthew 3:12-17](#)). As Jesus emerges from the water we hear, ***"This is My beloved Son"***, which evokes a related image: Israel was adopted and became God's son at the Exodus from Egypt, at the crossing of the Red Sea, and so this is New Exodus typology in which New Israel is born.

When we come to [Matthew 4:1-11](#) (which describes Jesus' temptation in the wilderness) if we are familiar with the First Testament we will see this pattern again. When we read that Jesus, the Son of God, spent 40 days and 40 nights in the wilderness, this reference may remind us of the Israelites' 40-year trek in the wilderness. But the comparison

goes beyond the number 40. The Israelites also were tempted in the wilderness in the same three areas in which Jesus was tempted:

- 1) Hunger and thirst
- 2) Testing God
- 3) Worshiping false gods.

Jesus, however, shows Himself to be the obedient Son of God where the Israelites were disobedient. Indeed, Jesus responded to the temptations by quoting Deuteronomy, the sermon that Moses gave the Israelites at the end of their 40-year sojourn.

What does Jesus do next in Matthew?

And when He saw the multitudes, He went up on the mountain; and after He sat down, His disciples came to Him. ² And opening His mouth He began to teach them, saying, (Matthew 5:1-2 NASB)

Jesus goes up on a mountain, like Moses, and gives New Torah—the [Sermon on the Mount](#). Jesus is the new Israel and this typology can only be seen if we are familiar with the First Testament.

Over and over Matthew says that all this information about Jesus is from the First Testament. One more:

And when evening had come, they brought to Him many who were demon-possessed; and He cast out the spirits with a word, and healed all who were ill ¹⁷ in order that what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled, saying, "HE HIMSELF TOOK OUR INFIRMITIES, AND CARRIED AWAY OUR DISEASES." (Matthew 8:16-17 NASB)

Okay, I think you get the point. Over and over Matthew quotes from the First Testament. Let me say again what I said earlier. To understand the words of the Second Testament we must understand the words of the First Testament. Let me try to demonstrate this to you. When the new believer who is reading Matthew comes to chapter 24 and they read:

"But immediately after the tribulation of those days THE SUN WILL BE DARKENED, AND THE MOON WILL NOT GIVE ITS LIGHT, AND THE STARS WILL FALL from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken, (Matthew 24:29 NASB)

How do they understand “sun, moon and stars”? They would most likely think in a literally way of the heavenly bodies. But if they were familiar with the First Testament they would have a different idea. So let’s go to the First Testament and see how sun, moon, and stars are used other than in a literal way. Where do we start? How about Genesis?

Now he had still another dream, and related it to his brothers, and said, "Lo, I have had still another dream; and behold, the sun and the moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me." (Genesis 37:9 NASB)

Is Joseph’s dream about the literal sun and moon and stars bowing to him? How would the sun bow? This may confuse us, but Joseph’s father knew exactly what he was saying:

And he related it to his father and to his brothers; and his father rebuked him and said to him, "What is this dream that you have had? Shall I and your mother and your brothers actually come to bow ourselves down before you to the ground?" (Genesis 37:10 NASB)

Jacob, Joseph’s father, interprets this dream as referring to himself, his wife, and their sons, who were the heads of

the twelve tribes identified as the sun, moon, and stars, respectively. They represented the foundation of the whole Jewish nation. When Jesus, therefore, spoke of the sun being darkened, the moon not giving its light, and the stars falling from heaven, He was not referring to the end of the solar system, but of the complete dissolution of the Jewish state.

This [apocalyptic language](#) is common among the Hebrew prophets. This idea is seen clearly as we look at passages where mention is made of the destruction of a state and government using language which seems to set forth the end of the world:

The oracle concerning Babylon which Isaiah the son of Amoz saw. (Isaiah 13:1 NASB)

In this chapter God is talking about the judgment that is to fall upon Babylon. The word “oracle” is the Hebrew word [massa](#) (mas-saw'), which means: “*an utterance, chiefly a doom.*” This introduction sets the stage for the subject matter in this chapter. If we forget this, our interpretations of Isaiah 13 can go just about anywhere our imagination wants to go. This is not an oracle against the **universe** or world, but against the nation of Babylon.

Wail, for the day of the LORD is near! It will come as destruction from the Almighty. (Isaiah 13:6 NASB)

Behold, the day of the LORD is coming, Cruel, with fury and burning anger, to make the land a desolation; And He will exterminate its sinners from it. ¹⁰ For the stars of heaven and their constellations will not flash forth their light; The sun will be dark when it rises, And the moon will not shed its light. ¹¹ Thus I will punish the world for its evil, and the wicked for their iniquity; I will also put an end to the arrogance of the proud, and abase the haughtiness of the ruthless. ¹² I will make mortal man scarcer than pure gold, and mankind than the gold of Ophir. ¹³ Therefore I shall make the heavens tremble, and the earth will be shaken from its place At the fury of the LORD of hosts In the day of His burning anger. (Isaiah 13:9-13 NASB)

Now remember he is speaking about the destruction of Babylon, but it sounds like world wide destruction. The terminology of a context cannot be expanded beyond the scope of the subject under discussion. The spectrum of language surely cannot go outside the land of Babylon. If you were a Babylonian, and Babylon was destroyed, would it seem like the world was destroyed? Yes! Your world would be destroyed.

Behold, I am going to stir up the Medes against them, Who will not value silver or take pleasure in gold, (Isaiah 13:17 NASB)

This is a historical event that took place in 539 B.C. When the [Medes destroyed Babylon](#), the Babylonian world came to an end. This destruction is said, in verse 6, to be from the Almighty, and the Medes constitute the means that God uses to accomplish this task. This is apocalyptic language. This is the way the Bible discusses the fall of a nation. This is obviously figurative language. God did not intend for us to take this literally. If we take this literally, the world ended in 539 B.C.

So when Matthew talks about the “sun, moon and stars” falling from the sky he is not talking about the end of planet earth, he is talking about the end of Israel—the Old Covenant. This understanding is critical! But if we do not understand the language of the first three quarters of the Bible we will never understand the last quarter—the New Testament.

The Bible was written in a time far distant from ours and in cultures quite strange to us. So as we try to discover the author's meaning, we must learn to read his writing as one of his contemporaries would. To do this we must understand the First Testament as they did. For example when you read:

BEHOLD, HE IS COMING WITH THE CLOUDS, and every eye will see Him, even those who

pierced Him; and all the tribes of the earth will mourn over Him. Even so. Amen. (Revelation 1:7 NASB)

We have all kinds of strange ideas as to what this means but if we are familiar with the First Testament we know that the Lord is often depicted as riding a cloud ([Psalms 18:7-15](#), [Psalms 68:4](#); [104:3](#); [Nahum 1:3](#)). As we place the biblical image in the light of the ancient Near East, we realize that God's cloud is a chariot that He rides bringing judgment. So when the Second Testament talks about Jesus riding a cloud we understand that this is not a white, fluffy cloud but a storm cloud that He rides into judgment. The more we understand the First Testament the better we will understand the language of the Second Testament.

Jesus said that the First Testament spoke of Him:

"You search the Scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is these that bear witness of Me; (John 5:39 NASB)

Paul when standing before King Agrippa said this:

"And so, having obtained help from God, I stand to this day testifying both to small and great, stating nothing but what the Prophets and Moses said was going to take place; (Acts 26:22 NASB)

According to this verse what was the content of Paul's preaching? It was the First Testament! Does this help you understand the importance of the First Testament?

Now let me share with you another rule of hermeneutics that will greatly help us in our study of Acts. This second rule of hermeneutics is [audience relevance](#). This means that whatever a passage meant, or whatever words spoken in Scripture meant, it meant or had direct application to the original intended audience.

To demonstrate that many do not understand this principle notice what one pastor wrote: *"You know the Bible is timeless. Let's look at these scriptures as though Paul had just sent an e-mail to the Neptune Church of God."*

Holding this view will keep you from understanding the Bible. I think that most Christians view the Bible this way, like it just arrived in the mail for you. But we must understand that if we disengage the original audience from the scriptures then we can make any passage mean whatever we want, or make them apply to whomever we want. Whenever we read the scriptures we must ask ourselves, "Who is this person talking or writing directly to?" We must remember that the Bible is a collection of personal letters and history books written by real people, to real people, in real time, and with real time contexts. For instance, in the book of Philippians the Apostle Paul wrote the following:

But I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you shortly, so that I also may be encouraged when I learn of your condition. (Philippians 2:19 NASB)

Does this verse teach us that we are supposed to be still waiting on Timothy today so that he can take word back to Paul on how we're doing? No! Why not? Because we correctly understand audience relevance, and that this was a personal letter from Paul to a real church in Philippi in 62AD about an event (sending Timothy) that was imminent to them, not to us. We correctly understand the time and place context. The Philippians are the intended audience of this book.

All time statements in the Bible must be viewed through this same lens of audience relevance. The books of the Bible are not mystical letters written nebulously to Christians throughout eternity whereby all time statements are free to be extracted and applied to whatever generation we wish. No, each book was directed to a specific audience, and again, Scripture is more than adequate to show us who that audience was.

In keeping with the subject of audience relevance, this may perhaps shock many people, but there is not one book in the Bible that was written TO anyone living today. Every single book in the Bible was written FOR us, for application and understanding, but none of them were written TO us. Every book in the bible is a personal letter, a history book, or writing by a prophet to particular people at a particular time and for a particular reason. Yes, we do glean truth and understanding from these books today, but that is far different than saying that these books were written TO us. To put it another way, we are reading other people's mail. Whenever someone today says "Here's what this Scripture means to me", we should be the first to say, "It doesn't matter what it means to you. It only matters what it meant to the original audience". That is where we find out what the Bible truly means. Only after we do that can we then apply it to ourselves.

Believer, I've got some bad news for you, which is my third point in understanding the Bible: It takes a lot of **time and hard work** to understand the Bible. Yet many Christians who are lazy and very casual in their approach to Bible study say they want to understand it:

The soul of the sluggard craves and gets nothing, but the soul of the diligent is made fat. (Proverbs 13:4 NASB)

Let me see if I can illustrate this for you. Who do you think was the highest paid professional athlete in 2006? Tiger Woods. In 2006 Woods earned an estimated \$100 million from winnings and endorsements. *Golf Digest* predicts Woods will become the world's first billionaire athlete in 2010. Woods is the most successful golfer of all time?

When did Tiger Woods start working on learning golf? Did he start in early adulthood and work on it one hour a week? Isn't that what most Christians do with Bible study? And tragically that one hour a week for most Christians is not much of a learning time, it's more of a story time. Tiger began at two years old and worked hours upon hours. There is no doubt that he is an extremely gifted man but he is what he is because of a lot of hard work. In our studies we have seen that the Jews from early childhood work on memorizing the Scriptures. By the time a boy is 12 he has the Torah memorized. That is a lot of work. So why do we think we can listen to one message on the Bible once a week and read it maybe once or twice a week and come to understand it. Why are we so arrogant and lazy that we spend no time in the book and yet get frustrated and even angry when we can't understand it?

My son, if you will receive my sayings, And treasure my commandments within you, ² Make your ear attentive to wisdom, Incline your heart to understanding; ³ For if you cry for discernment, Lift your voice for understanding; ⁴ If you seek her as silver, And search for her as for hidden treasures; ⁵ Then you will discern the fear of the LORD, And discover the knowledge of God. (Proverbs 2:1-5 NASB)

Do you cry out to God for Biblical understanding? Do you search the Scriptures with the same diligence that drives you to earn money? Understanding the Bible takes a huge TIME commitment. Is God worthy of your time?

One of the greatest problems in the church today is ignorance. There are some people who have been Christians for ten or twenty years but know next to nothing about the Bible. God doesn't tolerate ignorance.

The Nineteenth century English preacher [Charles H. Spurgeon](#) was right when he said: *"We're to eat into the very heart of the Bible until at last we come to talk in scriptural language and our spirits are flavored with the words of the Lord, so that the very essence of the Bible flows from us!"*

What are you doing right now to assure that you develop a thorough knowledge of God's Word? The range of possibilities is wide:

- You can commit yourself to a daily Bible-reading schedule.
- Take notes during Bible study meetings, read good Christian books, be disciplined by a mature Christian.
- Take classes or a correspondence course with a Christian college.
- Listen to good Christian teachers on television or radio.

Make sure you are receiving nourishment daily from God's Word using one or more of those avenues for learning. The best way to make sure you make progress is to meet regularly with a good Christian friend to share with each other what you're learning so that you may "*grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ*" (2 Pet. 3:18).

You might ask, "Why exert so much effort to Bible study?" I'll tell you why, because **Scripture is the self-revelation of God**. In it the mind and heart of God is laid bare on many matters. With a knowledge of Scripture we learn who God is and what he values. In the Bible God reveals Himself.

If we are going to understand the Bible we need to understand the rules of hermeneutics and apply them to our study. Scripture interprets Scripture and along with this we must realize that the Bible is ONE book. We must also apply audience relevance. And we must be willing to devote much time and energy to the Bible. Again I ask you, Is God worthy of your time? Does your commitment to Scripture demonstrate that He is worthy of your time?

This message was preached by [David B. Curtis](#) on Media #405.



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[Berean Bible Church](#)
1000 Chattanooga St.
Chesapeake, VA 23322