

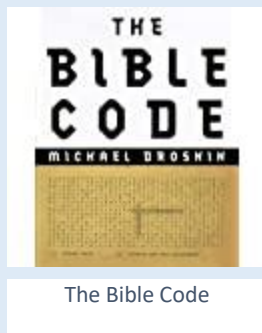
Study Guide #18: How Should We Study the Bible?

Introduction

Many Christians are confused about what the Bible teaches about different topics. This confusion results from not being comfortable with studying the Bible for themselves. In this Study Guide, we explore *how* to do that by identifying and explaining 7 basic principles for understanding Scripture.

Question #1: Can the Bible be understood using the Bible Code?

Answer: The idea of Bible codes is not new. However, the most recent flurry of discussion about it arose from Michael Drosnin's book *The Bible Code* (1997). His theory is that coded messages are buried in the Hebrew version of the Torah (the 1st 5 books of the Old Testament). By using computer programs, one can allegedly discover these coded messages. All kinds of historical information, including the destruction of the Twin Towers in New York City in 2001 and other sensational events and persons, have been "decoded." The entire idea is pure fantasy, however, because mathematicians have demonstrated that any large book will produce similar results. Unfortunately, things of this nature always attract people who would rather look for secret information that very few others know about than to actually study the Bible. The spirit of Gnosticism—the thirst for secret knowledge—is alive and well in the 21st century. [NOTE: Gnosticism is an ancient pagan Greek movement that emphasized the need to discover secret knowledge as the means of liberating the soul.]



Question #2: How can someone know what the Bible teaches about a specific topic?

Answer: The minimal tools required for a good topical study of the Scriptures are (1) a good translation of the Bible (see Explorer I, Study Guide #17, Question #7 & #8), and (2) *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (better known as *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance*). We also recommend 7 principles to use. The first principle is to *allow the Bible to be its own best interpreter*. The way to do this is to read *everything* the Bible says about a specific topic before drawing any conclusions. Jesus Himself used this method when, **“beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself”** (Luke 24:27, NKJV). *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance* will allow you to do that if you can identify the major key words used for the topic you are studying.

Question #3: What happens when you find a text that is difficult to understand?

Answer: A second principle is to allow the clear passages of Scripture to interpret the more obscure ones. You may have to lay aside a passage for awhile if it's too puzzling at the moment. Never draw a conclusion from an obscure text. If the topic is important, there will be plenty of clear passages from which to draw a sound conclusion. In fact, there may be *some* passages that we will never understand this side of heaven.

Question #4: Is there any other way that the Bible interprets itself?

Answer: Yes. A third principle of topical Bible study is to follow applicable Bible principles. One simple one that many (probably most) Christians don't follow is to *not* automatically discard an Old Testament teaching unless the New Testament provides clear reasons for doing this. This is because the Old Testament was the 1st Bible of Jesus and His apostles; the New Testament wasn't even completed until the end of the 1st century A.D. On the other hand, because the New Testament amplifies and fulfills much of what happened in the Old Testament, pay close attention to see if it does reinterpret, abolish, or apply something differently. For example, the New Testament uses the word "lamb" symbolically to describe Jesus, who is called "**the Lamb of God**" (John 1:29, 36). This helps to explain that all of those sacrificial animals in the Old Testament represented Jesus, and now that Jesus has been sacrificed, the old literal animal sacrificial system has come to an end.



Jesus the Lamb of God

Question #5: Would you provide another example of a basic Bible principle that helps us correctly interpret the Bible?

Answer: Yes. Another example is given in Jeremiah 18:7-10. On the basis of that passage, if God promised glory *or* doom for a particular nation, and then that nation changed its spiritual direction, the promise of glory *or* the prediction of doom will not come to pass. This is true except for the apocalyptic prophecies, like in Daniel and Revelation, which concern God's revelation of His foreknowledge and "**things which must shortly take place**" (Revelation 1:1; 22:6, NKJV, emphasis added). [NOTE: This principle has enormous consequences for interpreting end-time prophecies.]

Question #6: What is a fourth principle required for good Bible study?

Answer: The 4th principle of good Bible study is to study the context of a text, because *a text without a context is a pretext to believe whatever a person wants it to mean*. Read the passage and the surrounding verses several times, and perhaps even a chapter or two before and after it. As you do that, ask and answer the following questions:

- Who is talking (if a speaker is being quoted) or writing the passage?
- Who is the speaker or author talking/writing to?
- Is the passage part of a larger discourse? In other words, is it part of a series of parables, a sermon, and so on?
- What seems to be the nature of the problem being addressed by the speaker or author? Are there any big questions or issues being discussed in the context?

Question #7: How should you interpret a parable or poetry in Scripture?

Answer: This question leads us to the next principle of interpreting Scripture: *Interpret the passage according to the type of literature that it is.* Special literary types include poetry, parables, fables, and allegories. The better translations of the Bible show poetry like poetry is shown in any book. Remember that poetry paints a word picture of something. This means that it's more interested in getting a visual and/or audible image across than in being concerned with every detail. Some details are often present only to round off the picture. An example of this is Isaiah 34, which is an example of Hebrew poetry. The



Final Destruction of the Wicked

nation of Edom is used there as a symbol of all the heathen nations (vv. 1-2, 5-6), which chapter 34 says will receive God's judgment. Verses 9-10 says that **"the land shall become burning pitch. It shall not be quenched night or day; its smoke shall ascend forever"** (NKJV). In the next several verses after these, the prophecy describes numerous plants and animals that will live there afterwards. But if the land would burn forever (as in without end), no plants or animals could possibly live there. This tells us then that the language, being poetic, paints the word picture of complete destruction of the wicked, and *not* their continual ceaseless burning.

[NOTE: This has enormous consequences for interpreting Revelation's prophecies of the final destruction of the wicked.]

Although there are some nuanced differences among them, parables, proverbs, fables, and allegories should be interpreted in the same manner as poetry. They are all told to illustrate one or two major spiritual points. Like with poetry, treat the details as necessary for rounding out the word-picture. Read the passage several times so that you understand what that point is, or points are.

Question #8: How do you know if a Bible passage should be interpreted literally or symbolically?

Answer: The sixth principle for interpreting the Bible correctly is to interpret things in a literal way unless the literary type obviously uses symbolism, as with apocalyptic prophecies (especially in Daniel and Revelation). You should ask and answer the following 3 questions to determine if something should be interpreted symbolically or not:

- Is it impossible, according to common sense, to interpret it in a literal way? Naturally, one should assume the possibility of miracles since we are dealing with God's Holy Scriptures. For example, it would be impossible for anyone to literally be inside Abraham's bosom, as a person is pictured in the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16).
- Would interpreting something literally contradict anything else in Scripture, including the immediate context? An example of this is Isaiah 34 that we discussed under Question #7.
- Is the immediate context filled with obvious symbolic language? Numerous examples of such language are found in the apocalyptic prophecies of Daniel and Revelation, including a winged lion (Daniel 7:4), a winged 4-headed leopard (Daniel 7:6), a woman clothed with the sun (Revelation 12:1), and a 7-headed, 10-horned beast (Revelation 13:1).



Daniel 7's 4-headed Leopard

If the answer to *either* of the first 2 questions above is “yes,” then you can be certain that it must be interpreted symbolically. If the answer to the third question is “yes,” it still might be literal, but you should investigate further to find out for certain.

Question #9: If you discover that something is symbolic, how do you discover what the *meaning* of the symbolism is?

Answer: To discover what the meaning of a symbol is, you should allow the Bible to tell you what it is. To do that, please take the following steps:

1. Use *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance* to look up every single occurrence of that word and list on paper only the texts where it is used as a *symbol*.
2. Wherever that word is used as a symbol, read the context all around to see if its meaning is stated or otherwise made clear.
3. Finally, return to your original text and apply the meaning of the symbol that makes the most sense *in that context*.

In most cases, you will discover that there is usually only one meaning to a symbol in Scripture. For example, if you are studying Revelation 17 and notice that the 7 mountains on which the 7 heads sit are obviously symbolic mountains, you will learn that the only way a mountain is used symbolically in Scripture is as a nation or kingdom (see Isaiah 2:2-3; Jeremiah 51:1, 25; Daniel 2:35, 44).

Question #10: What is the seventh principle for interpreting the Bible correctly?

Answer: The final principle is literally the most important one of all: *Study the Bible with spiritual discernment*. This means that if the only or primary reason you're studying the Bible is to prove that the Bible or someone's interpretation of the Bible is wrong, then you will probably not understand it correctly. The attitude which we bring to the Scriptures is of vital importance. Without divine guidance, we are helpless because **"the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked"** (Jeremiah 17:9, NKJV). The apostle Paul put it this way: **"the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned"** (I Corinthians 2:14, NKJV). In other words, we must have the Holy Spirit in order to have spiritual discernment. And then the Holy Spirit will guide that person because He is **"the Spirit of truth"** (John 16:13, NKJV).

How does one receive the Holy Spirit? *First*, you should ask for Him in prayer. *Second*, you should obey the truth that you already know and learn, for the Scriptures teach that the Holy Spirit is given to those who **"obey"** God (Acts 5:32). In John 7:17, Jesus specifically and emphatically declared that if anyone really wants to do God's will, then he will know if a teaching is from God or not. From our own experience in working with people, this is where most people will fail if they're going to fail. Many don't want to commit themselves to follow the truth that they already have. Apparently, this is because so many people are not really searching for truth, but for happiness. And they tend to believe anything that they *think* will make them happy, and to reject anything that they *think* is an obstacle to their happiness. Intellectually, any reasonably intelligent person can be persuaded of the truth because the Scriptures are plain enough if you know how to study them. But if the spiritual commitment to follow the truth wherever it leads—no matter how unpopular it is—is not present, then a person will fail to learn more truth.