

iv. literary forms in the bible

The Bible, as a unity in diversity, expresses its unique message in a rich variety of literary forms. The literature of the Bible is an aesthetically beautiful interpretation of human experience from a divine perspective. As we read, interpret, and seek to apply the truths of Scripture, we must be careful not to overlook this artistic dimension, or we will miss an important part of enjoying the Bible.

In this section, we will take a brief look at the literary forms found in the pages of Scripture, including figurative language, narrative history, poetry, wisdom literature, prophetic literature, gospel, oratory, and epistle.

Figurative Language

The Bible abounds in figurative expressions. The wonderful imagery of Scripture is derived from a wealth of human experience, the manners and customs of the ancient Near East, family and business life, and the whole sphere of nature. While literal meaning refers to the normal or customary usage of a word or expression, figurative meaning refers to a concept which is represented in terms of another. The following list is not complete, but it outlines the major figures of speech used in the Bible.

Short Figures of Speech

Figures of comparison

Simile

A simile involves an explicit comparison of two unlike things using the words "as" or "like."

"So the daughter of Zion is left as a booth in a vineyard, as a hut in a garden of cucumbers, as a besieged city" (Isa. 1:8).

"All we like sheep have gone astray" (Isa. 53:6).

"For He is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap" (Mal. 3:2).

"For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be" (Matt. 24:27).

"Behold, I send you out as lambs among wolves" (Luke 10:3).

Also see Isaiah 29:8; 55:10-11; Jeremiah 23:29; Matthew 23:37; 1 Corinthians 13:11; 1 Thessalonians 5:2.

Metaphor

A metaphor involves a direct or implied comparison of two unlike things.

"The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer" (2 Sam. 22:3).

"We are His people and the sheep of His pasture" (Ps. 100:3).

"And other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice; and there will be one flock and one shepherd" (John 10:16).

The seven "I am" statements of Jesus in the Gospel of John are all metaphors.

"I am the bread of life" (John 6:35).

"I am the light of the world" (John 8:12).

"I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture" (John 10:9)

"I am the good shepherd" (John 10:11).

"I am the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25).

"I am the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6).

"I am the true vine, and My father is the vinedresser" (John 15:1).

Also see Psalm 23:1; Jeremiah 2:13; Luke 8:21; Revelation 1:20.

Figures of association

Metonymy

In metonymy, the name of one object or concept is used for another because of an association or similarity between the two.

"They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them" (Luke 16:29). This is a metonymy, because "Moses and the prophets" stands for the writings of Moses and the prophets.

"There is one God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith" (Rom. 3:30). In this metonymy, "circumcision" and "uncircumcision" is another way of saying "Jew" and "Gentile."

"Then Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him and were baptized by him in the Jordan" (Matt. 3:5-6). It was not the city of Jerusalem that moved, but the people who lived in it.

Also see Genesis 42:38; Proverbs 23:26; Matthew 23:22; Luke 1:46; Ephesians 5:16.

Synecdoche

In a synecdoche, a part is used for a whole, or a whole is used for a part.

"All flesh had corrupted their way on the earth" (Gen. 6:12). Flesh is used for the whole person.

"And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease; eat, drink, and be merry'" (Luke 12:19). Soul is used for the whole person.

"For God so loved the world" (John 3:16). "World" is used for the people in the world.

"All Scripture is given by inspiration of God" (2 Tim. 3:16). "All Scripture" is used for every part of Scripture.

Also see Psalm 145:21; Isaiah 58:5; John 12:19; 1 Peter 1:9.

Figures of humanization

Personification

Personification is a figure of speech which takes a human characteristic and applies it to an object, quality, or idea.

"Destruction and Death say, 'We have heard a report about it with our ears'" (Job 28:22).

"Does not wisdom cry out, and understanding lift up her voice?" (Prov. 8:2).

"The field is wasted, the land mourns" (Joel 1:10).

"Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things" (Matt. 6:34).

Also see Leviticus 18:25,28; Matthew 6:3; Romans 10:6; 1 Corinthians 12:15-16.

Anthropomorphism

Anthropomorphism is a figure of speech which takes a human characteristic and applies it to God.

"Then I will take away My hand, and you shall see My back; but My face shall not be seen" (Exod. 33:23).

"He who touches you touches the apple of His eye" (Zech. 2:8).

"Lord, hear my voice! Let Your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications" (Ps. 130:2).

"No one is able to snatch them out of My Father's hand" (John 10:29).

Also see Exodus 15:8; Psalm 91:4; Isaiah 40:10-11; John 1:18.

Apostrophe

Apostrophe is a figure of speech in which an exclamation is addressed to an object as if it were a person.

"Then he cried out against the altar by the word of the Lord, and said, 'O altar, altar!'" (1 Kings 13:2).

"Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth!" (Isa. 1:2).

"Open your doors, O Lebanon, that fire may devour your cedars. Wail, O cypress, for the cedar has fallen" (Zech. 11:2).

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her!" (Matt. 23:37).

Also see 2 Samuel 1:21; Psalm 148:3-4; Ezekiel 36:1,4,8; 1 Corinthians 15:55.

Figures of illusion

Irony

Irony is an expression that denotes the opposite of what is meant by the words themselves.

"And so it was, at noon, that Elijah mocked them and said, 'Cry aloud, for he is a god; either he is meditating, or he is busy, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is sleeping and must be awakened'" (1 Kings 18:27).

"No doubt you are the people, and wisdom will die with you!" (Job 12:2).

"Go and cry out to the gods which you have chosen; let them deliver you in your time of distress" (Judg. 10:14).

"Come to Bethel and transgress, at Gilgal multiply transgression; bring your sacrifices every morning, your tithes every three days" (Amos 4:4-5).

"'Throw it to the potter'--that princely price they set on me. So I took the thirty pieces of silver and threw them into the house of the Lord for the potter" (Zech. 11:13).

"For you put up with fools gladly, since you yourselves are wise!"
(2 Cor. 11:19).

Also see Deuteronomy 32:37; Job 38:4-5; Isaiah 57:13; John 19:14; 2 Corinthians 11:19; 12:13.

Hyperbole

In hyperbole, the writer or speaker exaggerates to create a strong effect.

"Every one could sling a stone at a hair's breadth and not miss"
(Judg. 20:16).

"I am weary with my groaning; all night I make my bed swim; I drench
my couch with my tears" (Ps. 6:6).

"Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me remove the speck out of
your eye'; and look, a plank is in your own eye?" (Matt. 7:4).

"And there are also many other things that Jesus did, which if they
were written one by one, I suppose that even the world itself could
not contain the books that would be written" (John 21:25).

Also see Numbers 13:33; Deuteronomy 1:28; Psalm 107:26; Matthew 5:29-30.

Figures of understatement

Euphemism

A euphemistic figure substitutes an inoffensive or agreeable expression for one that
may offend or suggest something distasteful.

"You shall go to your fathers in peace" (Gen. 15:15). A euphemism
for death.

"Unless the Lord had been my help, my soul would soon have settled in
silence" (Ps. 94:17). A euphemism for death and burial.

"Our friend Lazarus sleeps, but I go that I may wake him up" (John
11:11). A euphemism for death and resurrection.

"From which Judas by transgression fell, that he might go to his own
place" (Acts 1:25). A euphemism for hell.

Also see Leviticus 18:6; 2 Kings 22:20; Ecclesiastes 12:2-7; John 2:25.

Litotes

Litotes involves belittling or the use of a negative statement to affirm a truth.

"After whom has the king of Israel come out? Whom do you pursue?"

A dead dog? A flea?" (1 Sam. 24:14).

Behold, the nations are as a drop in a bucket, and are counted as the small dust on the balance; look, He lifts up the isles as a very little thing" (Isa. 40:15).

"And they brought the young man in alive, and they were not a little comforted" (Acts 20:12).

"I am a Jew from Tarsus, in Cilicia, a citizen of no mean city" (Acts 21:39).

Also see Genesis 18:27; Psalm 22:6; Acts 27:14; Romans 1:13.

Figures of emphasis

Pleonasm

Pleonasm is a figure that uses an excessive number of words for the sake of emphasis.

"Yet the chief butler did not remember Joseph, but forgot him" (Gen. 40:23). The redundant "but forgot him" adds force to the statement.

"Then Jephthah fled from his brothers" (Judg. 11:3). The literal expression is "from the face of his brothers."

"And it came to pass in those days" (Mark 1:9). The emphatic "and it came to pass" is common in the Old and New Testaments.

"Knowing that God had sworn with an oath" (Acts 2:30). The redundant "with an oath" adds emphasis.

Also see Genesis 38:1,24,28; 42:2; Exodus 12:20; 2 Kings 20:1; 1 John 1:8.

Repetition

Emphasis is gained by a number of techniques that repeat the same word, phrase, or sentence.

"Moses, Moses!" (Exod. 3:4).

"The waters saw You, O God; the waters saw You" (Ps. 77:16).

"For His mercy endures forever" is repeated in each verse of Psalm 136.

"Blessed" is repeated through the beatitudes in Matthew 5:3-11.

"Eloi, Eloi" (Mark 15:34).

"Nor" is repeated several times in Romans 8:38-39.

"To another" is repeated in a list of the spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 12:8-10).

Also see Deuteronomy 28:3-6; Psalm 22:1; 96:13; 1 Corinthians 13:7.

Climax

This figure lists a series of actions or qualities and repeats each one.

"What the chewing locust left, the swarming locust has eaten; what the swarming locust left, the crawling locust has eaten; and what the crawling locust left, the consuming locust has eaten" (Joel 1:4; cf. 1:3).

"In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it" (John 1:4-5).

"And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope. Now hope does not disappoint" (Rom. 5:3-5).

"But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love" (2 Pet. 1:5-7).

Also see Hosea 2:21-22; Romans 8:29-30; 10:14-15; James 1:14-15.

Figures requiring completion

Ellipsis

Ellipsis refers to the omission of one or more words that must be supplied by the reader to complete the thought.

"And Saul had a concubine, whose name [was] Rizpah, the daughter of Aiah. So [Ishbosheth said to Abner, 'Why have you gone in to my father's concubine?'" (2 Sam. 3:7). The words "was" and "Ishbosheth" are italicized in the translation because they are not in the Hebrew text. They were added to complete the sense of the passage.

"Uzzah put out [his hand] to the ark of God and took hold of it, for the oxen stumbled" (2 Sam. 6:6). "His hand" must be supplied to complete the thought.

"He will not always strive [with us], nor will He keep [His anger] forever" (Ps. 103:9).

"For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be [in the likeness] of [His] resurrection" (Rom. 6:5).

Also see 1 Chronicles 16:7; Psalm 137:5; Ezekiel 47:13; Hebrews 7:8.

Zeugma

In this figure, a word modifies two or more words but strictly refers to only one of them. One or more words must be supplied to complete the thought.

"I have surely visited you and [seen] what is done to you in Egypt" (Exod. 3:16).

"Forbidding to marry, [and commanding] to abstain from foods" (1 Tim. 4:3). "Forbidding" only applies to marriage, and "commanding" must be supplied.

Also see Exodus 20:18; Deuteronomy 4:12; 2 Kings 11:12; 1 Corinthians 14:34.

Aposiopesis

This is a rhetorical figure that breaks off a thought in mid-sentence.

"And now, lest he put out his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever"--therefore the Lord God sent him out of the garden of Eden" (Gen. 3:22-23).

"Yet now, if You will forgive their sin--but if not, I pray, blot me out of Your book which You have written" (Exod. 32:32).

"But if we say, 'From men'--they feared the people, for all counted John to have been a prophet indeed" (Mark 11:32).

"And if it bears fruit, [well.] But if not, after that you can cut it down" (Luke 13:9).

Also see Psalm 6:3; Luke 15:21 (cf. 15:19); John 6:62; Acts 23:9.

Exercise: Try to identify the figures of speech found in the following verses (some verses use more than one): Genesis 18:27; Exodus 15:8; Leviticus 18:25,28; 2 Kings 22:20; Psalm 23:1; 107:26; 145:21; Ezekiel 36:1,4,8; Matthew 23:37; Luke 1:46; Romans 8:29-30; 1 Corinthians 13:7; 13:11; 2 Corinthians 11:19.

Extended Figures of Speech

Parables

Parables are extended figures of comparison that often use short stories to teach a truth or answer a question. While the story in a parable is not historical, it is true to life, not a fairy tale. As a form of oral literature, the parable exploits realistic situations but makes effective use of the imagination. Jesus frequently composed parables in His teaching ministry (see Mark 4:34) and used them in response to specific situations and challenges. His parables are drawn from the spheres of domestic and family life as well as business and political affairs. He used imagery that was familiar to His hearers to guide them to the unfamiliar.

Some of the parables were designed to reveal mysteries to those on the inside and to conceal the truth to those on the outside who would not hear (Matt. 13:10-17; Mark 4:10-12). This was especially true of the parables that related to the kingdom of God. However, other parables like the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) and the parable of the landowner (Matt. 22:33-46) could be grasped by unbelievers.

Parables have one central point; the details are not meant to call attention to themselves but to reinforce this single theme. In most parables, assigning allegorical meanings to each of the details can lead to confusion and obscure the point.

A good joke produces the spontaneous response of laughter. If the joke must be explained, it loses its impact. In a similar way, a parable must be "caught" by the hearer. The story parables (e.g., the good Samaritan, the prodigal son, the workers in the vineyard, the rich man and Lazarus, the wise and foolish virgins) are all designed to elicit a response from the hearers. The moment it is grasped, the point of the parable penetrates like the point of an arrow. Nathan's parable of the rich man who slaughtered the poor man's lamb sank into David like a shaft when Nathan said, "You are the man!" (2 Sam. 12:1-7). As soon as David caught the parable, he was caught by it.

Allegories

The parables in the gospels range from similitudes to true parables to allegories. The parable of the leaven (Matt. 13:33-35) is a similitude, because it is an illustration from everyday life. The parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32) is a true parable, because it is a story that has a beginning and an end. The parable of the vineyard owner (Mark 12:1-11) is closer to an allegory, because it has a number of details that have corresponding conceptual meaning.

While a parable is an extended simile, an allegory is an extended metaphor. The allegory of the vine and the branches in John 15, for example, develops the metaphors of Christ as the true vine (vss. 1,5), the Father as the vinedresser (vs. 1), and believers as the branches (vs. 5).

Allegorical stories have several points of comparison. In John 10:1-18, the allegory of the good shepherd draws a point-by-point comparison between a number of elements (the door of the sheepfold, the shepherd, the sheep, the thief, and the hireling) and corresponding spiritual truths.

Allegories range on a continuum from the elusive to the explicit. In some, the details obviously point to a corresponding group of concepts, as in the allegory of the good shepherd; in others, the thematic implications of the images is less clear. Jesus told the parable of the soils to the multitudes but explained the spiritual application of each point of the story to His disciples (Matt. 13:1-23; Mark 4:1-20). While parables use realistic imagery, allegories often use words in a figurative rather than literal sense. The parable of the lost sheep (Luke 15:3-7) uses "sheep" literally, but the allegory of the good shepherd uses "sheep" figuratively; the parable of the vineyard owner (Luke 20:9-21) uses "vineyard" literally, but the allegory of the vine and the branches uses "vine" figuratively.

The allegories in the Old Testament include Israel as a vine in Psalm 80:8-15, the woman of folly in Proverbs 7, the allegory of old age in Ecclesiastes 12:1-7, and the allegory of the two sisters in Ezekiel 23. New Testament allegories include the foundation and superstructure in 1 Corinthians 3:10-15 and the spiritual armor in Ephesians 6:11-17.

On rare occasions, the New Testament allegorizes Old Testament narratives that were not intended to teach truth by correspondence. Paul does this in Galatians 4:21-31 when he turns the story of Hagar and Sarah into an allegory of law and grace.

Obscure Figures of Speech

Dark sayings

Scripture contains enigmatic or dark sayings (Num. 12:8; Ps. 49:4; 78:2) that state truth in an obscure way and must be searched out to find the meaning.

"The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh comes; and to Him shall be the obedience of the people" (Gen. 49:10).

"There shall come forth a Rod from the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots" (Isa. 11:1).

"No one puts a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; for the patch pulls away from the garment, and the tear is made worse" (Matt. 9:16).

Also see Isaiah 21:11-12; Daniel 5:25-28; Matthew 9:15,17; Luke 11:34-36.

Riddles

A riddle is a concise and puzzling statement posed as a problem to be solved or explained.

"Out of the eater came something to eat, and out of the strong came something sweet" (Judg. 14:14; cf. 14:12-19).

"Here is wisdom. Let him who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man: His number is 666" (Rev. 13:18).

Fables

A fable is a fictitious narrative intended to enforce a useful truth or a moral lesson. Fables often involve plants and animals that speak and act like human beings. See the fable of the trees in Judges 9:8-15 (interpreted and applied in 9:16-20), the fable of the thistle in 2 Kings 14:9, and the fable/allegory of the two eagles in Ezekiel 17:2-10.

Symbols and Types

Symbols

Symbols are figures of representation in which one thing is used to suggest another. The symbol is a literal object that conveys a lesson or truth.

The pillar of cloud and fire (Exod. 13:21-22) symbolized God's glory and presence among His people.

Blood symbolized the life of an animal or human (Lev. 17:11; Deut. 12:23-25).

Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones (Ezek. 37:1-14) symbolized the judgment and restoration of Israel.

The basket of summer fruit in Amos 8:1 symbolized the end (8:2) that would come in judgment. The Hebrew words for "summer fruit" and "end" sound almost alike, and ripe fruit is either consumed or spoiled--an apt symbol of judgment.

Numbers (e.g., four, seven, and twelve), colors (e.g., blue, purple, scarlet, white, and black), and metals (e.g., gold, silver, bronze, iron) are used symbolically in Scripture.

Also see Jeremiah 1:13; 13:1-11; 24:1-10; Daniel 2:31-45; Zechariah 1:18-19; 5:1-4; Revelation 1:20.

Types

Types are prophetic symbols. A number of Old Testament people, events, and things are types that correspond to New Testament antitypes.

Melchizedek was a type of Christ (Gen. 14:18-20; Ps. 110:4; Heb. 7:1-10).

David was a type of Christ (Ps. 22:1-21; 69:7,9,20; cf. Rom. 15:3).

Adam was "a type of Him who was to come" (Rom. 5:14), that is, Christ.

The earthly tabernacle was "a copy and shadow of the heavenly things" (Heb. 8:5).

Also see 1 Corinthians 3:16-17; 10:6,11; 2 Cor. 6:16-18.

Narrative

Narrative, or story, is the most common literary form in the Bible. Both testaments are full of the stories of God's redemptive work on behalf of His people. This form is so prominent in Scripture because the God of the Bible acts in the arena of human history.

On one level, hundreds of individual narratives like the story of Jacob and Laban are sprinkled throughout the Scriptures. On a higher level, these individual narratives combine to form major motifs like Israel's deliverance from Egyptian bondage and conquest of Canaan. On the highest level, these larger narratives fit together into the ultimate narrative of God's plan to deliver people out of darkness and bring them into the light of His kingdom.

On each level, the biblical narratives contain universal patterns or archetypes that capture the essential themes of human experience. The inner and outer conflicts between good and evil, heaven and hell, light and darkness, angels and demons, wisdom and foolishness, faith and doubt, courage and cowardice, obedience and rebellion, hope and despair are enacted throughout the narratives of Scripture.

When all the stories are combined together, a magnificent, unified plot with a beginning, middle, and end unfolds, and the reader realizes that he or she is a part of this plot. From creation to consummation, the sovereign hand of God is upon the course of history.

Creation and Consummation

There are a remarkable number of parallels between the first and last three chapters of the Bible. These chapters portray the beginning and the end of the great drama of God's creative/redemptive purposes. Genesis 1-3 moves from the creation of the universe to the creation and fall of man. Revelation 20-22 moves from the judgment of the unsaved to the creation of the new universe in which believers will dwell with God. The stories of creation and consummation both stand at the transitional point between time and eternity. Enclosed between these two accounts is the stage of human history on which each person must make the choice between one of two destinies: endless separation from God or endless fellowship with God.

Both of these narratives blend figurative with literal language since they deal with realms of existence that transcend our experience. They combine to tell us that our brief earthly existence is not all there is; we must live in the light of who we are (creation) and where we are going (consummation).

Epic

An epic is a long narrative, often written in an elevated poetic style, that combines many episodes. Although written in prose, portions of the biblical account of the exodus from Egypt to Canaan in the books of Exodus to Deuteronomy combine together to fit the epic form. The exodus epic is unified by strong nationalistic elements (the formation of the nation of Israel), a central hero (Moses), and the underlying motif of a quest (the promised land). But unlike conventional epics, the real hero of the exodus epic is not a man, but God Himself. The account extolls the mighty acts of God, not Moses, and focuses more on moral and spiritual values than on human accomplishments. While a conventional epic would praise the exploits of men, the exodus epic exposes the Israelites as a rebellious, frail, and sinful people in need of the grace and deliverance of God.

Law

A good portion of the narratives in Exodus 20 through Deuteronomy 31 is written in the form of legislation for the nation of Israel. The law consists of the testimonies (moral duties), the statutes (ceremonial duties), and the judgments or ordinances (civil and social duties). The bulk of the more than 600 commandments in the Pentateuch are found in the Book of the Covenant (Exod. 20:22-23:33), the Deuteronomic Code (Deut. 12-26), and the Code of Holiness (Lev. 17-26).

Part of the Old Testament law consists of apodictic ("do" and "do not") commands. These are direct commands that generally apply to every Israelite. The rest of the law is casuistic (case-by-case). These commandments are conditioned by specific circumstances.

The law is written in the ancient form of a binding covenant between a lord and his vassal. Obedience on the part of the vassal would lead to agreed benefits and protection, but disloyalty would lead to punishment (cf. the blessings and cursings of Deuteronomy 27-28).

Heroic Narrative

In this form of narrative literature, the story is based on the exploits of a principal character. To the extent that the hero or heroine embodies accepted social and moral virtues, the story of his or her life becomes a model for others to imitate. The protagonist's values, the roles he or she fills, and the way he or she faces conflicts are important themes in heroic narrative.

Old Testament examples of this literary form include the story of Abraham (Gen. 12-25), Jacob (Gen. 27-35), Joseph (Gen. 37-50), Gideon (Judg. 6-8), Ruth, David (1 Sam. 16--2 Sam. 24; 1 Chron. 11-29), Esther, and Daniel.

Tragedy

Some of the protagonists of Scripture fell from a position of blessing to calamity. The narratives of their lives are tragic because of the disastrous change in their fortunes. There is a greatness about most of them that is marred by a fatal flaw in their character. This is why the reader hopes in vain that the story will turn out better than it does.

In each case, the tragic protagonist faces one or more critical moral choices and fails. The consequences of this failure may not be immediate, but they inevitably bind him in a web from which he cannot escape. He is at once responsible for and victimized by his tragedy. In some cases like Samson in Judges 13-16, the tragic hero gains insight from his suffering. Other biblical examples of tragic narrative are Adam and Eve (Gen. 3), Saul (1 Sam. 9-31), and Solomon (1 Kings 1-11; 2 Chron. 1-9).

Poetry

More of the Bible is written in poetry than most people imagine. In addition to the books of Job, Psalms, Proverbs, and the Song of Solomon, a substantial portion of the prophetic literature (including most of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, and Micah, Nahum, and Zephaniah) is also poetic. Almost half of the Old Testament is poetry, but in many translations some of this poetry appears in prose form.

The poetry of the Bible is an effective vehicle for communicating the full range of human emotions from the heights of joy to the depths of despair. In a very personal way, the poets and prophets expressed their sorrows, the plight of their people, and their unshakable hope in the Lord.

Parallelism in Hebrew Poetry

While many forms of poetry rhyme sounds, Hebrew poetry rhymes ideas. Since the rhythm is logical rather than phonetic, much of it is retained in translation. In most verses, the thought of the second line is parallel to the thought of the first line. Some verses are made of three, four, and even five lines, and the parallelism can extend throughout.

Synonymous parallelism

In this form of parallelism, the thought of the first line is repeated in different words in the next line(s).

Lord, how they have increased who trouble me!

Many are they who rise up against me (Ps. 3:1).

Also see Genesis 4:23-24; Psalm 49:1; 103:3; Proverbs 11:7,25; 12:28.

Antithetic parallelism

In this case, the thought of the first line is sharply contrasted in the next line(s).

A soft answer turns away wrath,

But a harsh word stirs up anger (Prov. 15:1).

Also see Psalm 1:6; Proverbs 10:1; 15:2,4-9,13-15,18-22; 27:6.

Synthetic parallelism

Here, the thought of the first line is added to or developed in the next line(s).

Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly,

Nor stands in the path of sinners,

Nor sits in the seat of the scornful (Ps. 1:1).

Also see Psalm 1:2; 19:7-9; Proverbs 4:23; Isaiah 55:6-7.

Introverted parallelism

This is an external parallelism that balances sets of lines. For example, the first and fourth lines and the second and third lines may be parallel as in Proverbs 23:15-16 (cf. Ps. 5:7). In Psalm 30:8-10, lines 1-2 are parallel to lines 7-8, and lines 3-4 are parallel to lines 5-6.

Climactic or stairlike parallelism

This uses parallelism to build to a climax by repeating part of the first line and adding to it in the next line(s).

Give unto the Lord, O you mighty ones,

Give unto the Lord glory and strength.

Give unto the Lord the glory due to His name (Ps. 29:1-2a).

Also see the rest of Psalm 29.

Emblematic parallelism

Here, a literal statement in one line is elevated by a figurative image in another.

As cold water to a weary soul,

So is good news from a far country (Prov. 25:25).

Also see Psalm 42:1; Proverbs 11:22.

In addition to these forms of parallelism, there are also incomplete forms which have only partial correspondence. Another technique in some Hebrew poetry is the use of acrostics, or alphabetical poems. In this poetry, the first line or set of lines begins with the first letter of the alphabet, and the poem proceeds in this way to the end of the alphabet (examples include Psalm 9, 10, 25, 34, 111, 112, 119, 145; Prov. 31:10-31; Lam. 1-4).

While there is some meter in biblical poetry, it is not a major characteristic. When meter is used, it appears in the form of varying combinations of stressed units per line (e.g., 3:3, 3:2, 2:2:3). This meter, in turn, is interlaced with the different kinds of parallelism. The stressed units and part of the parallelism cannot be discerned without the Hebrew text. Even with the Hebrew, the divisions between the stanzas or strophes is sometimes unclear, since the thought breaks are not always of uniform length.

Narrative or Dramatic Poetry

The book of Job is an excellent example of narrative poetry that portrays a dramatic story. The plot moves from prosperity to calamity to the restoration of prosperity.

There are a number of plot conflicts, including Satan's conflicts with God and Job, the conflict between Job and his friends, and the conflict between Job and God.

The prologue (chapters 1-2) and the epilogue (42:7-17) are written in prose, and the rest of the book is in the form of a poetic dialogue. The action moves slowly in the poetic section, and the reader is expected to concentrate more on the development of

the imagery and the concepts than on the sequence of events. Within this great poetic narrative there are many lyric passages. It also part of the wisdom literature of the Old Testament because of the themes it explores, including the goodness and sovereignty of God in view of the problem of evil and suffering.

Lyric Poetry

Lyric poetry is predominant in the book of Psalms and the Song of Solomon. The psalms speak to the mind through the heart. Since they were set to music, their emotional effect was even greater when they were sung as part of Israel's worship in the first and second temples. They are rich in the artistry of parallelism, figurative imagery, symbolism, multiple meanings, and emotive vocabulary.

Each of the psalms is a brief literary unit that develops a theme and makes a distinctive contribution to the psalter. The psalms are structured in different ways and can be classified into several types, including individual and communal lament psalms, individual and communal thanksgiving psalms, descriptive praise psalms, and wisdom psalms. The different types of psalms had specific functions in the individual and corporate worship of Israel.

Pastoral Literature

This literary form uses the idyllic imagery of rural poetry or shepherds in a rustic setting to portray a feeling or a truth. Psalm 23, for example, takes the reader through a day in the life of a shepherd who cares for his sheep from morning to night. The psalmist uses these images to express God's gracious care for His people. Jesus carries this a step farther in His allegory of the good shepherd (John 10:1-18). The prophets also made effective use of pastoral settings to depict the blessings of God's kingdom (see Isa. 40:10-11; 41:18-19; Hos. 14:4-7; Amos 9:13-15). The Song of Solomon describes the experience of love by praising the beauty and virtue of the beloved through natural and rustic images (see Song of Sol. 2:8-17; 7:10-13).

Literature of Praise

The Bible is full of beautiful examples of the literary form of encomium, or praise. The godly man, for example, is praised in Psalms 1 and 15, and wisdom is personified as a woman and praised in Proverbs 8. The last 22 verses of Proverbs uses the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet to praise a virtuous wife (Prov. 31:10-31). First Corinthians 13 is an unsurpassed encomium of agape, and the author of Hebrews praises faith in 11:1-12:2.

But the Scriptures reserve the highest praise for the Lord. See Psalms 8, 19, 29, 33, 36, 103-105, 111, 113, 117, 135, 136, 139, 146-48, and 150. Also see the Song of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 52:13-53:12. The Lord Jesus Christ is praised in John 1:1-18; Philippians 2:5-11; Colossians 1:15-18; and Hebrews 1:1-14. The Revelation portrays a magnificent scene of praise for the Father (4:8-11), the Son (5:9-10), and combined praise for the Father and Son (5:11-14).

Wisdom Literature

While the wisdom literature of the Bible is denoted more by content than by form, it usually appears in the form of didactic poetry that teaches principles about life. Most of this literature is in Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes. Some of the Psalms (1, 37, 119) and much of the book of James can also be categorized as wisdom literature. Jeremiah 18:18 mentions three classes of spiritual leaders in Hebrew culture: priests, prophets, and the wise (cf. 1 Kings 4:29-34; Job 12:12). Joseph, Abigail, Solomon, and Daniel are examples of those who possessed prudence and wisdom. As observers of life, the wise could give right answers in critical situations. They were highly practical rather than theoretical; they knew the course of action that would lead to the desired results in life. The sages analyzed conduct and studied the consequences of given actions.

Wisdom is more than shrewdness or intelligence; it relates to practical righteousness and moral acumen. The key word for wisdom is *hokhmah*, which literally means "skill." Wisdom is the skill in the art of living life with each area under the dominion of God. It is the ability to apply truth in the light of experience. The wisdom literature stresses that the basis for true success in skillful living is the fear of the Lord.

This literary form is generally expressed in poetic terms and uses a variety of techniques including parallelism (antithetic parallelism dominates Prov. 10-15, and synthetic parallelism dominates Prov. 16-22), numerical sequences (Prov. 30:15-31), alliteration (Eccles. 3:1-8), and the full spectrum of figurative language. The proverb is a special feature of wisdom literature because it uses a comparison or simple illustration to make a poignant observation about life. Proverbs are practical and concise; they are meant to be read slowly in small sections. These maxims are easily memorized statements that are true to life even though individual cases may differ.

Prophetic Literature

The Old Testament Prophets

The prophets were divinely appointed individuals who received God's messages through dreams, visions, angels, and direct encounters with the Lord, and related these messages in oral, visual, and written form. Many of them like Nathan, Elijah, and Elisha left no written records, but those who did are responsible for about one-fourth of the Bible.

The bulk of the seventeen prophetic books in the Old Testament apply the standards of the moral law of God to the attitudes and practices of the day (twelve were written before, two during, and three after the exile in Babylon). As spokesmen who declared God's will for His people, the prophets proclaimed this word through warnings and promises. They exposed the sinful practices of the people, warned about judgment to come, and called the people to repentance. They stressed the need for right belief (orthodoxy) and right practice (orthopraxy). Theirs was a twofold message of condemnation because of the sin of man and consolation because of the grace of God.

The prophetic books engage in forthtelling and foretelling. The bulk is forthtelling, or spiritual insight: exhortation, reproof, and instruction. The remainder is foretelling, or spiritual foresight: prediction of immediate and distant events to come. These prophecies were not intended to satisfy curiosity, but to show that God is in sovereign control over all of history. Most of these predictions have already been fulfilled, because they concerned the judgment of various nations including Israel and Judah. Some anticipated the coming Messiah and were fulfilled in the first advent of our Lord. Others await fulfillment in the events associated with His second advent.

There is a great diversity and individuality among the prophets ranging from the sophistication of Isaiah to the simplicity of Amos. Their personalities, backgrounds, interests, and writing styles vary widely. These writings usually take the form of collected oracles that are not always in chronological order. They utilize poetic parallelism, parables, allegories, and other figurative language as well as covenant lawsuits (e.g., Hos. 4), woe oracles (e.g., Mic. 2:1-5), and salvation oracles (e.g., Jer. 31:1-9). Some of them also express their message through satire, which is "the exposure, through ridicule or rebuke, of human vice or folly" (Leland Ryken). Two examples are the book of Jonah and Amos 4.

The Revelation

The book of Revelation is a highly structured work that combines elements of almost all the literary forms in the Bible, including figurative language, parallelism, typology and symbols, epic, narrative, lyric and narrative poetry, and praise. The three dominant literary types in this book are apocalypse, prophecy, and epistle. Apocalyptic literature appears in parts of Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and Zechariah as well as extrabiblical books dating from about 200 B.C. to A.D. 200. John's Apocalypse shares the basic characteristics of this kind of literature: visions, symbolic language and use of numbers, highly stylized structure, a concern for future events (eschatology), the warfare between good and evil, the judgment of evil, and divine deliverance in time of persecution. The book of Revelation combines these features with a genuinely prophetic word for the church, and puts all of this in the form of an epistle (Rev. 1:4-7; 22:21).

The Revelation is full of contrasting themes: light vs. darkness, heaven vs. earth, time vs. eternity, the forces of good vs. the forces of evil, the establishment of the city of God (new Jerusalem) vs. the destruction of the city of evil (Babylon), the sealing of the saints vs. the mark of the beast, the wedding feast of the Lamb vs. eternal separation from God. The book abounds with archetypal images (universal qualities of human experience). Its richness in symbolism (e.g., numbers, animals, colors, minerals) has led to many interpretive problems, resulting in four major approaches to the book.

Much of its structure revolves around the number seven (seven churches, 2-3; seven seals, 6-8:1; seven trumpets, 8:2-9:21; seven signs, 12-14; seven bowls, 15-16; seven

final events, 17-22). Because of the abrupt shifts in the visions and events, it is difficult to arrange them in a clear chronological sequence.

The Revelation makes abundant use of Old Testament imagery and ties together many biblical thematic strands into a great portrait of the consummation of all things. As it concludes the plot of Scripture from eternity to eternity, it shows that history is leading to a purposeful climax under the sovereign rule of the living God. Gospel

The Greek word euaggelion means "good news" or "glad tidings." The good news about salvation in Christ was first proclaimed orally and later written in the unique literary form known as the gospels. They are highly episodic and do not fit the other literary categories like heroic narrative. The unifying theme of the gospels is the person and work of Jesus Christ who is portrayed not merely an example to be followed, but as the way to eternal life and the rightful object of man's supreme allegiance. Though they are full of biographical material, the gospels are really thematic portraits of the God-man, taken from four different perspectives.

The gospels combine blocks of sayings, dialogues, and narratives to confront the reader with the unique claims and credentials of Christ. They are four complementary accounts that provide a composite picture of the Savior in such a way that the total is greater than the sum of the parts. In a highly selective manner, each develops major themes in the life of Christ with particular stress on the events of the last week. The gospels depict the conflict between belief and unbelief and build to the climax of the crucifixion and resurrection.

Another major theme is the work of Jesus in relation to the kingdom of God.

Christ's death and resurrection inaugurated the beginning of the age to come; in one sense, the time of God's rule has already begun, but in another sense it still awaits consummation with His second coming.

The gospels display Jesus' unparalleled facility with poetic forms. He was a master of using analogies in nature and human experience to illustrate His teachings. His application of similes, metaphors, parables, allegories, hyperbole, irony, paradox, proverbs, and questions is striking and illuminating.

Oratory

There are several excellent examples of oratory in the Scriptures. Solomon's sermon and prayer at the dedication of the temple in 2 Chronicles 6 well illustrates the art of speaking in public with force and eloquence.

That the Lord Jesus possessed an unsurpassed oratorical ability is clear from His brief sayings to His extended discourses. The Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7) is a model of persuasiveness and exhortation that makes brilliant use of metaphor, rhetorical questions, analogies from nature, synonymous and antithetic parallel construction, repetition, and satire. Those who were privileged to hear these words were astonished at His teaching (Matt. 7:28-29).

The apostle Paul was also a skillful and effective orator. The book of Acts records the effect of his speeches and teachings on different audiences (13:16-45; 14:12; 21:40-

22:24; 24:10-25; 26:1-28). His address before the Areopagus in Acts 17:16-34, although cut short by the audience, illustrates some of the features of classical rhetoric. Paul began by using the classic form of the exordium, or introduction, to gain the attention and interest of his hearers. By using an anecdote and quoting from Stoic poets, he sought to win common ground with his sophisticated audience. Beginning in verse 30, Paul moved into the second part of his address, the *propositio*, or statement of his thesis. But the resurrection of the dead was too much for this Greek audience that viewed the spirit as good but the body as evil.

Epistle

On one end of the spectrum of letters is the personal, nonliterary letter; on the other end is the formal epistle that is intended for the public and posterity. The epistles of the New Testament are unusual in that they combine elements of both, in varying combinations. Most of them, like 1 and 2 Thessalonians, generally follow the standard form of ancient letters: the name of the writer, the name of the recipient, a greeting, a wish or thanksgiving, the body of the letter, and a final greeting and farewell. But Hebrews lacks most of these elements, and 1 John lacks all of them. Nine of the New Testament epistles are addressed to churches or groups of churches (they were to be read aloud in congregational meetings), and four (1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon) are addressed to individuals. All of them arose out of specific occasions. Some are formal in nature (e.g., Romans and Hebrews), while others are quite personal (e.g., 2 Corinthians, 2 Timothy, and Philemon). There is also a wide variation in the amount of theological content, though none of the epistles were simply intended to be theological treatises. Formal or informal, they all bear the mark of apostolic authority.

The literary quality of the epistles does not surface in their form but in the stylistic richness that they exhibit throughout. Many of Paul's letters have long, eloquent sentences that flow into a climax (cf. Eph. 1:3-14,15-23; 3:14-21). Paul's extended military metaphor in Ephesians 6:10-17 makes use of vivid images and parallel construction (also see 1 Cor. 13). There are lyric passages as in Romans 8:31-39; Ephesians 4:4-6; 1 Timothy 3:16; and 2 Timothy 2:11-13. The epistles also enhance their persuasiveness through passages written in an exalted style (see 1 Cor. 15:39-58; 2 Cor. 4:8-9; 6:4-10; Phil. 2:1-2; 4:8; Jas.3:6-12).

V. interpreting the Bible

"There are hundreds of ways of interpreting the Bible--what makes you think that yours is correct?" While it is true that Christians disagree over a number of issues (e.g., the meaning of Genesis 1-2, the fulfillment of prophecy, the justifiability of war), there is far more agreement over the cardinal doctrines of Christianity than most people think. Almost all denominations share the foundational truths about God, man, sin, and salvation (what C. S. called "mere Christianity"). The vast majority of Christians, for example, concur with the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed.

When interpretive disagreement occurs, it is usually because of faulty or inconsistent methods of interpretation (hermeneutics). Some people, for instance, impose their own preconceived notions upon the pages of Scripture instead of allowing Scripture to speak for itself. But when the basic principles of interpretation are put into practice, most difficulties disappear. Here are fifteen principles along with specific exercises that will sharpen your skills in interpreting the Bible:

The Principle of Biblical Authority

Do not regard the Bible as a textbook; it is not merely an object to be observed but an oracle to be obeyed. Approach it with a proper attitude of reverence, care, and receptivity. It is alive with the Spirit of God, and it has the power to change the lives of those who respond to it. It is trustworthy and inexhaustible. There are always fresh truths within its pages, and the more deeply we mine, the more insight we will gain. It can transform our thinking and gradually move us from a human to a divine perspective.

Exercise: Inspiration has been defined as "God's superintendence of the human authors so that, using their own individual personalities, they composed and recorded without error His revelation to man in the words of the original autographs" (Charles C. Ryrie). Read the following passages and briefly describe how each aids your understanding of inspiration: Jeremiah 30:2; Matthew 5:17-18; 15:4; John 10:35; 17:17; Acts 28:25; 2 Timothy 3:16-17; 1 Peter 1:10-12; 2 Peter 1:20-21; 3:15-16; Revelation 22:19.

The Extent of Biblical Authority

The authority of Scripture is not limited merely to matters of religious faith; it extends to all that it affirms, including historical events, geography, chronology, and the miracles of the Old and New Testaments. The Bible has been challenged in many ways--for instance, Daniel did not write the prophecies in the book of Daniel; Jesus did not feed the multitudes but inspired them to share their lunches. But if the Bible is not trustworthy in matters like these, how can we be sure that it is reliable in other areas? Either we place ourselves under the authority of Scripture or we do not. To fully understand its message, we must submit to it.

Exercise: According to John 7:17, what condition must be met to recognize Jesus' true authority?

Scripture, Tradition, and Experience

The Word of God should be our final court of appeal for authority. As valuable as tradition and experience are, we must interpret them in light of Scripture. The church does not decide what Scripture teaches; Scripture determines what the church teaches. Tradition is an important authority, but it is not the ultimate authority. Many traditions, true and false, have surfaced throughout the history of the church. If a tradition or personal experience is clearly contrary to the teaching of Scripture, it is not of the Lord. On the other hand, experience supports the validity of biblical truth; if Christianity is true, it should be practical enough to change lives. Exercise: A person decides to increase his giving over a period of several years and discovers that he is better off financially than when he began. Is he justified in teaching that the same thing will happen to others when they increase their giving? Why or why not?

Scripture and Human Reason

Like tradition, reason is a significant authority. But it, too, must be placed under the dominion of Scripture. The Bible affirms a number of truths that seem impossible to resolve. How can Jesus Christ be fully God and fully man? How can the three Persons in the one Godhead be fully and completely God and not each other? These matters are not ultimately contradictory, but they do go beyond the limits of human comprehension. There are only two choices: submit our reason to the authority of Scripture and accept the tension, or submit Scripture to the authority of our reason and resolve the tension (e.g., play down the deity or humanity of Christ).

Exercise: The Bible teaches that God is sovereign over all, but man is responsible for his decisions. Compare Romans 9:6-21 with Romans 10:9-15. What do you do with the tension between these passages?

The Principle of Biblical Unity

This principle counsels us to treat the Bible as a complete book, since it is a unity in diversity. We should seek to relate each book we study to the central theme of Scripture: God's loving plan to redeem and restore imperfect people through the perfect work of His Son. The better we grasp the big picture, the better we will be able to see the details in proper perspective.

The New Testament builds upon the Old, and requires a familiarity with the history and imagery of the Old Testament. Without this, many New Testament passages would be extremely difficult to understand. Hebrews 9, for example, assumes a knowledge of the structure and function of the tabernacle.

Exercise: How would you answer the charge that the God of the Old Testament is wrathful and judgmental, whereas the God of the New Testament is loving and merciful?

The Principle of Progressive Revelation

The Bible is a unified book, but as we study its pages, we should also remember that it is a progressive revelation. Over the fifteen or more centuries during which it was written, its portrait of God and His redemptive program was gradually enriched

and clarified. It has been said that "The New is in the Old concealed; the Old is in the New revealed."

This is not to say that the religion or ethical standards of the Bible evolved from a primitive to a sophisticated level. Rather, it means that the revelation of the person and character of God has become clearer through the course of biblical history (see Heb. 1:1-2). Since the fullness of God's revelation is in the New Testament, we must avoid the temptation of reading the New Testament back into the Old. At the same time, we should avoid the opposite pitfall of projecting Old Testament civil or ceremonial laws into our own time (e.g., the dietary laws).

Exercise: Read Hebrews 10:1-18 in light of this principle.

The Principle of Clarity

This principle tells us to let the Bible speak for itself. We should allow Scripture to interpret Scripture, since it is its own best interpreter and commentator. Move from the known to the unknown by interpreting unclear passages in the light of those which are clear. When wrestling with a difficult passage, consult other verses which deal with the same subject in a simpler way. Then bring the unclear into conformity with the clear. Everything that is necessary to salvation and sanctification is clearly revealed in Scripture.

It is also wise to gain familiarity with the gospels and epistles before tackling more difficult books like Ezekiel and Revelation.

Exercise: Compare Galatians 5:4 with John 10:27-29 on the issue of salvation.

Which passage is clearer?

The Principle of Correlation

To be truly biblical, a specific doctrine must incorporate everything the Word has to say about it. We build up our understanding of theology by comparing Scripture with Scripture. It is unwise to base any doctrine on one or two miscellaneous verses or on controversial, obscure passages.

This principle tells us to correlate the teachings of Scripture by using cross references. 1. Verbal cross references compare the use of a word or expression in several passages. 2. Conceptual cross references compare similar ideas or doctrines like the resurrection or redemption. 3. Parallel cross references compare passages that recount the same incident like the feeding of the 5,000 or the life of Hezekiah in 2 Kings, 2 Chronicles, and Isaiah. Correlation involves both inductive reasoning (specific passages to general conclusions) and deductive reasoning (general premises to specific applications).

Exercise: Here are some difficult verses that have been used as proof texts for unbiblical doctrines: John 15:6; Hebrews 6:4-6 are used to refute the security of the believer. James 2:24 is used to show that works are necessary for salvation. Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; 22:16 are used to teach that water baptism is a necessary condition for salvation. What is the problem in each case?

Exercise: Mormons use 1 Corinthians 15:29 to justify their practice of proxy baptism for unbelievers. How do you respond?

The Principle of Context

Interpret every passage in light of its immediate context (preceding and following verses, paragraph, chapter) and broad context (book, testament, Bible). A verse lifted out of its context can become a pretext. It is not as easy to twist the meaning of a verse when it is observed in its setting.

The first level of context is the material that surrounds the passage you are interpreting. For example, to interpret the three parables in Luke 15, it is important to notice that Jesus was addressing them to the Pharisees and scribes (Luke 15:1-3). Exercise: Use James 1:2-4 to discover the kind of wisdom James had in mind in 1:5. Use Philippians 4:10-12 to interpret Paul's statement in 4:13.

The second level of context is the book in which your passage appears. Your approach should be appropriate to the Testament, whether Old or New, and it should also be consistent with the theme, purpose, and style of the book.

The third level of context is the Bible as a whole. Relate the passage you are considering to the broad context of scriptural teaching. What contribution does it make to God's plan in human history?

The fourth level of context is the culture and historical background in which the passage was written. See "The Principle of Background."

The Principle of Normal Usage

Take the text at face value and interpret it in its normal or literal sense. Do not interpret it in a symbolic or allegorical way unless the context tells you that parables, symbols, or other figures of speech are being used.

It is always better to identify the plain and natural sense of a passage instead of looking for hidden meaning. It cannot be literal and figurative at the same time. For example, "I am the door of the sheep" (John 10:7) is figurative because it uses an inanimate object to describe a living person; it cannot mean that Jesus is a wooden door. Only when the literal meaning does not fit the context, as in poetic or parabolic language, should we interpret a passage figuratively.

Exercise: How do you approach the story of Balaam and his donkey in Numbers 22:21-35? Should you understand it literally or figuratively? Why?

The Principle of Application

A passage normally has only interpretation, though it may lead to a number of applications. This principle tells us to distinguish the single interpretation from the multiple applications.

The New Testament tells us that the events of the Old Testament have moral and spiritual applications for us today (see Rom. 15:4; 1 Cor. 10:6,11; 2 Tim. 3:16-17), but this does not give us a license to read allegorical meanings into these events. It is true that the New Testament sometimes tells us that specific Old Testament events are symbolic of spiritual truths. For instance, Paul tells us that the rock that provided the Israelites with water in the wilderness is symbolic of Christ (1 Cor. 10:4). In Galatians, he uses the story of Sarah and Hagar as an allegory of the old and new covenants (Gal. 4:21-31). But this symbolic use of historical facts was

written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and as interpreters of Scripture, we cannot lay claim to the same authority. Unless the inspired writers of Scripture designate a secondary or "hidden" meaning in an event or a prophecy, we are on shaky ground when we look for such a meaning. If we try to impose more than one sense on a passage without biblical warrant, we will fall into the trap of spiritualizing, symbolizing, and allegorizing.

Therefore, we should normally look for a single meaning and prefer the clearest and most obvious interpretation when there is more than one possibility.

Any applications we draw from a passage should be consistent with its meaning. We may, for example, observe the way Jesus used the simple analogy of water in talking with the woman at the well and decide to look for effective analogies when we have opportunities to share the gospel with others. But it would be wrong to apply the passage by concluding that we must use the analogy of water when we tell others about Christ.

Exercise: Some people interpret the Song of Solomon as a portrait of Christ and His bride, the church. Is this a valid interpretation? Is it a valid application?

The Principle of Background

This principle tells us to consider the historical background of the portion of Scripture we are interpreting. This, along with any relevant customs and geography, provides the proper backdrop to add to our understanding of the passage. Ask the question, "What did this passage mean to the people of that time and culture?"

The historical setting includes the situation of the author and his purpose for writing the book or epistle. Who wrote it? When was it written? What was the occasion? What are the historical references in the book? Who were the recipients? Who are the main characters?

When Paul wrote to the Philippian church, he was in prison, waiting to know if he would be executed or released. Ten years before, he was a prisoner in Philippi (Acts 16:12-40). Background information like this will greatly aid our understanding of the themes and allusions in this epistle.

The physical setting includes any geographical references in the passage or book. The book of Amos, for example, begins with a catalog of judgments on the nations that surround Israel. A map will show how these catastrophes gradually spiral in on Israel herself (Amos 1:3-2:16). The physical setting also relates to references to plant and animal life.

The cultural setting includes information about manners and customs of Bible lands that would help our understanding of the meaning of a passage. Biblical and extrabiblical sources provide us with information about such things as ceremonial cleansing, idolatrous practices, wedding customs, oriental hospitality, and so forth. A knowledge of the historical, physical, and cultural settings will give us a better picture of what a passage meant to the people to whom it was written.

Exercise: How does Acts 13-15 aid your understanding of the epistle to the Galatians?

The Principle of Verbal Interpretation

We should understand words in a way that is consistent with how they were used at the time they were written.

Lexical study--Even without knowing the original languages, one can pick any word in the Bible, discover the Hebrew or Greek word from which it was translated, and learn the literal meaning of that word. This can be done with tools like Strong's Concordance, Englishman's Hebrew and Chaldee Concordance of the Old Testament, and Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words. It is also helpful to compare translations.

Comparative study--Using a concordance, you can determine how often a word is used and what writers used it.

Theological study--The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament and the Dictionary of New Testament Theology are excellent tools for discovering the theological usage of significant words.

Be sure to interpret any word in relation to its immediate context.

Exercise: In what different ways is the word "faith" used in Romans 14:23; Galatians 1:23; 1 Timothy 5:11-12?

The Principle of Grammatical Interpretation

This principle tells us to be aware of the grammatical details of the sentences of Scripture. Sentences are units of thought that are governed by the rules of grammar. Obviously, it would be best to study grammatical constructions in the original language, but since this is not possible for most students of Scripture, much of the needed information is available in good Bible commentaries. When focusing on a particular verse, it is a good idea to see what more than one commentator says about it.

Exercise: Look up John 1:14 in two commentaries. What grammatical insight did you gain?

The Principle of Theological Interpretation

This rule tells us to discover the meaning of a passage rather than impose one upon it. Every interpreter has a theological perspective, whether he knows it or not. If we are not careful, our natural tendency will be to read our doctrinal view into Scripture by overlooking some passages and camping on others. When this happens, our theology becomes more authoritative than the Bible.

Instead of interpreting a passage on the basis of a dogmatic system (eisegesis), we must be willing to modify our thinking according to what Scripture really says (exegesis).

Exercise: Read the parable of the ten virgins in Matthew 25:1-13. How do you think people of different theological persuasions would approach this parable? What do you think is the central point of the parable?

The Principle of Literary Form

As we saw in Section IV, the Bible uses a wide variety of literary forms. As interpreters, we must take these literary genres into account, because they control the meanings of sentences. We will look briefly at short figures of speech, parables (an extended figure of speech), and prophecy.

Interpretation of Figurative Language

We saw that we must understand a passage literally unless the context indicates that figurative language is being used. When this is the case, we should enjoy such imagery, because the abundance of figures of speech in the Bible adds beauty, appeal, and persuasiveness to the written Word.

The Bible accommodates divine revelation to the human mind by using human languages, idioms, thought forms, and experience. This is why the language used to describe heaven (e.g., jewels, gold, no tears), and hell (e.g., fire) is cast in terms of human experience. When the Bible speaks of God, one of the most common figures of speech is anthropomorphism (e.g., His hands, feet, eyes, mouth). This does not mean that God has a physical body any more than Psalm 91:4 means that He is a giant bird ("He shall cover you with His feathers, and under His wings you shall take refuge"). By its very nature, figurative language should not be taken literally. However, this is not to say that there is no literal reality behind the figure. When Christ called Himself the bread of life, He did not mean that He was a baked loaf; the literal reality behind this figure is that He offers spiritual nourishment and life to anyone who trusts in Him.

When you encounter a figure of speech, first try to decide what kind of figure it is (use Section IV) and then determine the literal reality behind the figure. Be sure to interpret in light of the context.

Exercise: What kind of figure does Jesus use in Matthew 16:19? What is the literal reality behind the figure?

Some of the biblical symbols are explained by the Scriptures (e.g., the stars and lampstands in Rev. 1:20). We can use these symbols as a guide to assist us in interpreting those symbols that are not explained. Some symbols, like the lion, are used in more than one way, and we must not force them to mean the same thing. Use the immediate and broad context and exercise caution, especially when dealing with numerical, mineral, and color symbolism.

Interpretation of Parables

When working with parables, try to determine the one principal truth rather than getting caught up in analyzing the details. Normally, a parable has one major point of comparison. The purpose of the parable of the soils, for example, was to illustrate the basic responses to the proclamation of the Word. If we attempt to examine the meaning behind each of the elements (as in an allegory), we will get mired in speculation. Instead, each of the details should be related to the main point of the parable.

Another rule is to see how much of the parable is explained by the Lord (e.g., Matt. 13:18-23; 25:13), and to use the context for any other interpretive clues (e.g., Luke 15:1-3).

Exercise: What is the central point in the parable of the faithful steward in Luke 12:41-48 (cf. Matt. 24:45-51)?

Interpretation of Prophecy

As with other Scripture, we should interpret prophecy in a literal way unless the context or its use in the New Testament indicates that the language is figurative (e.g., Mal. 4:5-6 compared with Matt. 11:13-14; 17:10-13).

When interpreting prophecy, give attention to the historical background and the context in which it appears. Try to correlate your passage with similar prophecies (e.g., the day of the Lord and the restoration of Israel).

A number of prophecies were completely fulfilled soon after they were made (e.g., the destruction of Assyria in Isa. 10:5-19). Other prophecies were partially fulfilled in the days of the Old Testament, with the remainder fulfilled in the New Testament (e.g., Isa. 7:14). Some were partially fulfilled in the first advent of Christ and await complete fulfillment in His second advent (e.g., Isa. 52:13-53:12). From the perspective of the prophet, one event appeared to be right after the other, since he did not see the valley between the first and second mountain ranges. It is helpful in interpreting prophecy to be aware of these distinctions.

Exercise: Compare Luke 4:17-21 with Isaiah 61:1-2. What part did Christ leave out, and why?

The Principle of Limitation

There are many difficult passages in Scripture, and scholars continue to debate over their meaning. Figures of speech, prophetic symbolism, obscure historical and cultural allusions, lexical and grammatical difficulties, and other problems mean that we cannot be sure of the correct interpretation of some texts. At times, we need to admit our ignorance and acknowledge our limitations. It is better to humble ourselves than to dogmatically cling to uncertain interpretations. There are times when we should say, "I don't know," or, "I lean in this direction, but I can't be sure." There is a hierarchy of doctrines in Scripture--some are far more important than others. The more important the truth, the clearer the biblical revelation. Central truths like the character of God, the person and work of Christ, the way of salvation, and the fundamentals of Christian living are explicitly developed in the pages of Scripture. It is wise to concentrate on the essential truths rather than major on the minors.

When in doubt, we should check our results by standing on the shoulders of those who have gone before. The great nineteenth-century preacher Charles H. Spurgeon observed, "It seems odd, that certain men who talk so much of what the Holy Spirit reveals to themselves, should think so little of what he has revealed to others."

The Principle of Openness

It is essential that we approach the Scriptures with conscious dependence on the illuminating ministry of the Holy Spirit. We must also be willing to put aside our theological bias and be open to whatever He desires to communicate to us through His Word.

For many people, the real problem is not so much in interpretation (understanding) as it is in application (moral response). Mark Twain understood this well when he said, "Most people are bothered by those passages in Scripture which they cannot understand. The Scripture which troubles me most is the Scripture I do understand."

vi. studying the bible

The Bible is often taken for granted, even by those who vehemently support its inspiration and authority. Many believers associate Bible study with drudgery; limiting themselves to mere samples, they never cultivate a true taste for its contents. There are two basic reasons for this problem: lack of a proper motivation and lack of a proper method. This section is designed to overcome these obstacles to fruitful Bible study.

To own a Bible is a tremendous responsibility--to whom much has been given, much is required (Luke 12:48). The Scriptures must not merely be owned, but known; not merely known, but believed; and not merely believed, but obeyed. To encourage this, we will look at the prerequisites, process, and practice of Bible study.

Prerequisites of Bible Study

The Prerequisite of a Plan

Even if we realize the tremendous significance of a working knowledge of the Word in our lives, the prospect of Bible study may still seem unexciting and unrewarding because of the inadequate procedures we have used in the past. We may be properly motivated, but we could also be victims of improper methods.

When people grope in the darkness of haphazard approaches to Scripture, it is little wonder that Bible study seems so unsatisfying and has such a minimal place in their lives. The hit-and-miss approach of Bible roulette provides little spiritual nourishment. Without an ability to understand and apply the truths of Scripture in a practical and meaningful way, believers miss out on the benefits of exploring and discovering biblical truths for themselves. This is why so many Christians have only a secondhand knowledge of the Bible and rely almost exclusively on the input of teachers and preachers.

The material on the process and practice of Bible study later in this handbook will provide you with a plan that will make your time in the Word more rewarding.

The Prerequisite of Discipline

While we need a plan or method of getting into Scripture for ourselves, no approach to the study of the Bible will be effective without a measure of discipline and consistency. If we are convinced of the value of time spent in the Word (the problem of motivation) and realize that fruitful approaches are available (the

problem of method), the only remaining obstacle is the inertia that keeps us from beginning and tempts us to stop. There is no shortcut to extracting the deeper spiritual truths from the mine of Scripture. Even though they are available to all, we must be willing to expend the effort to find them. The dividends are well worth the effort: consistent time in the Word will shape the way we see the world and the way we live our lives. But this consistency cannot be won without commitment.

The Prerequisite of Dependence

We need a plan for Bible study, and we need the discipline to follow through with that plan so that it will become a habitual part of our lives. But these will do us little good if they are not pursued with a conscious sense of dependence upon the teaching and illuminating ministry of the Holy Spirit (John 16:13-15). We must combine discipline (human responsibility) with dependence (divine sovereignty) as we approach the Scriptures. We cannot properly comprehend or respond to biblical truths in our own power; this requires the grace of God.

Exercise: What does 1 Corinthians 2:6-16 say about the role of the Holy Spirit in our understanding of God's revelation?

The Prerequisite of Responsiveness

We must not only open God's Word--we must also be open to His Word. James tells us that we must prove ourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive ourselves (Jas. 1:22). This requires responsiveness to the truth we receive as we receive it. If we are disobedient to the light we have been given, we will not receive further illumination (cf. Mark 4:23-25). The old couplet is true:

Light obeyed increaseth light,
Light rejected bringeth night.

Salvation begins with a response to the person and work of Christ as revealed in Scripture. The sacred writings "are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 3:15). Non-Christians cannot "receive the things of the Spirit of God" (1 Cor. 2:14) because they do not have the Spirit. Unless a person has a relationship with God, he cannot understand His Word. Similarly, one must grow in this relationship to increase his capacity to understand Scripture. Our fellowship with the Lord is dependent upon obedience (see John 15:14-15), and disobedient Christians cannot accept the solid food of the Word (see 1 Cor. 3:1-3). As G. Campbell Morgan observed, "if we persist in the things against which we are warned, the Bible becomes a sealed book, and we can neither know it, nor teach it."

The Prerequisite of Honesty

"Holy Scripture is the unchangeable word of God to which man must bend himself, and not something which he can bend to his own personal ideas" (Jean Danielou). The truth of the Bible is radical, and we will often be tempted to twist it to fit our preconceived opinions and tone down its message so that we will be more comfortable. We must be honest before the Word, and this means openness to new insights and willingness to give up cherished notions. "Unless we carefully examine

the hidden assumptions that constitute our perspective, and seek to discover God's unique perspective on issues critical to understanding Scripture, we are bound to misunderstand. And, misunderstanding, we will find the Bible a disappointing book" (Lawrence O. Richards).

The Prerequisite of Exposure

"For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27).

We must expose ourselves and others to the whole counsel of God, and this requires a comprehensive view of the entire spectrum of the Bible. There are five basic categories of Scripture: Old Testament historical books, poetical books, and prophetic books; New Testament historical books (gospels and Acts), and epistles. If we limit ourselves to any one of these categories (e.g., the gospels or the epistles) and avoid the others, we will suffer from an imbalanced diet and our perspective will be distorted.

Process of Bible Study

Research

1. In Bible study as well as prayer, it is crucial to choose the right time and place so that we can be consistent. This discipline of consistency is essential to a growing theoretical and practical knowledge of the Word of God. Listen to this statement by D. L. Moody:

A man stood up in one of our meetings and said he hoped for enough out of the series of meetings to last him all his life. I told him he might as well try to eat enough breakfast at one time to last him his lifetime. This is a mistake that people are making; they are running to religious meetings and they think that the meetings are going to do the work. But, if this doesn't bring you into closer contact with the Word of God, the whole impression will be gone in three months.

2. Don't be haphazard in selecting a passage for study. Try to be systematic in your choice of topics, chapters, and books so that your input will come from all parts of Scripture and touch upon every aspect of your life. Design your study sessions so that you will not sacrifice quality for quantity by overburdening yourself with unmanageable portions. Work with sections you can thoroughly digest.

3. Avoid getting bogged down in one translation. Use a primary version for in-depth study, memorization, and meditation, but work with others from time to time. Some versions are better for broad reading, while others are more suited to detailed study.

4. Gather information from the text by bombarding it with as many questions as you can and doing the necessary research to answer them. This will force you to delve into the Word instead of skimming over it.

5. Using the information you have collected, determine what the author means and try to glean insights. State your conclusions in the form of principles.

Response

Even if we observe all the rules, engage in conscientious and thorough research, and develop dazzling principles, we can still miss the whole point of Bible study. God

did not inspire Scripture so that we could accumulate a great wealth of information, but "that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:17). As Irving L. Jensen noted, "The important thing is not how many times you've gone through the Bible, but whether the Bible has gone through you." We must respond to what we learn through our study by allowing God to transform our attitudes, feelings, and actions. Only then will our study of the Word be glorifying to God.

Ask, Answer, Accumulate, Apply

You should familiarize yourself with four basic steps that will enrich your time in the Word regardless of what specific method you use: ask, answer, accumulate, and apply. With them, Bible study will be productive and meaningful; without them, it will be dry and empty. Use these four steps until they become second nature to you. When you begin to saturate your study with them, your time in the Word will never be the same.

Ask

Ask key questions which when answered will provide insight into the meaning of the text. Perhaps the most important skill in Bible study lies in asking the right questions. Here are the questions you should use:

ASK . . .

WHO? -- The persons

WHAT? -- The problem, plot

WHEN? -- The time

WHERE? -- The place

WHY? -- The purpose, reason

HOW? -- The solution, resources

IS THERE . . .

A key word? -- Important to meaning

A comparison? -- Often introduced by "like"

A contrast? -- Often introduced by "but"

A repetition? -- Indicates emphasis

An atmosphere? -- Joy, anger, fear, etc.

A clear literary form? -- Poetry, prophecy, narrative, etc.

A progression? -- Events, ideas

A climax? -- Lesser to greater

A significant point of grammar? -- Tense, sentence structure,
number (singular or plural)

Answer

Good questions demand accurate answers. There are two primary sources for these answers: the text and the tools of the trade.

Text and context

We have already noted that Scripture best explains Scripture. You will find that many of your questions will be answered in the immediate and broad context of the passage you are studying. Always look here first, and you will experience the joy of creative discovery.

Tools

Begin to collect and use the tools of the trade. These will give you great help in finding the answers you need for any method of Bible study. Just as a carpenter would never go to work without his hammer and saw, the serious student of Scripture would be ill-equipped if the tools of Bible study are not within arm's reach.

See the bibliography at the end of this section for some basic study tools you should consider adding to your library.

At the end of his life, the Apostle Paul gave this exhortation to Timothy, his child in the faith: "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15). A careful and consistent use of the text and the tools will help us fulfill this mandate.

Accumulate

Once you have asked the right questions and arrived at clear answers, you are ready to accumulate practical principles. The easiest way to accomplish this is to put on your "SPECS":

Sins to Forsake

Promises to Claim

Examples to Follow

Commands to Obey

Summary Thought for Today

Apply

"The end result of all Bible study should be the application to life. Remember, the Word of God is 'seed' to be planted in your heart, to take root and bear fruit" (Lloyd M. Perry). Because biblical truth touches upon all areas and relationships of life, it is important that we maximize its impact by being very specific in the way we apply it. In this fourth stage, the SPECS you have accumulated throughout your study should now be prayerfully applied to these eight vital relationships:

1. God and You
2. You and Yourself
3. Husband and Wife
4. Parent and Child
5. Employer and Employee
6. Christian and Christian
7. Christian and World System
 - Non-Christians
 - Satan
8. Christian and Creation

Practice of Bible Study

The practice of Bible study involves a variety of methods that will enable you to uncover the treasures of Scripture in different ways. Each is designed to provide its own particular benefit, and it is a good idea to try using all of them to find the ones that help you the most. After becoming familiar with them, you may want to switch methods from time to time to avoid getting caught in the rut of routine. Some of them compliment each other and can be used concurrently. The process of ask, answer, accumulate, and apply can be successfully plugged into any of these methods.

Planned Reading

Definition

This method is the broadest approach to Scripture because it involves the systematic reading of book after book according to a predetermined plan. There are many variations, but most of them relate to daily readings derived from a yearly goal (e.g., reading the whole Bible in a year).

Benefits

1. There is no better way to get a comprehensive overview of the Word. Reading large segments of Scripture will give you an increasing familiarity with the flow of the people, places, events, and concepts in the Old and New Testaments.
2. Long-term use of planned reading will take you beyond favorite portions and expose you to the whole counsel of Scripture.
3. You will begin to think creatively across books and Testaments as you discover connections between concepts in different passages.

Steps

1. Set a goal for what you want to read and target a realistic completion date. If you decide to read the Bible in a year, you can choose one of the available reading schemes or formulate your own. It is usually desirable to include daily input from more than one portion of Scripture in your reading plan.
2. In *Enjoy Your Bible*, Irving L. Jensen has suggested a method that will help you actively interact with the text as you go along:

- a. Read

(1) Read aloud. This is especially helpful in devotional literature like the Psalms.

(2) Read carefully. Don't be mechanical; try to be alert and observant.

(3) Read repeatedly. Additional readings will give you greater insight into a passage.

(4) Read peripherally. As you read a text, think about its context.

b. Reflect

(1) Reflect purposefully. As you reflect upon the passage you are reading or have just completed, do it with the clear purpose of knowing God better and becoming more conformed to the image of His Son.

(2) Reflect imaginatively. Actively use your mind's eye to visualize the situation and put yourself in it.

(3) Reflect humbly. Never take the Bible for granted; remember that you are privileged to reflect upon the revelation of the living God.

(4) Reflect prayerfully. Personalize your reading by communicating with God about the truth you derive from it.

(5) Reflect patiently. Reflection takes time and concentration. Include this in the time you have allotted for your reading.

c. Record

When an important verse, thought, or application emerges from the text, jot it down so that you can retain it and refer to it in the future.

d. Respond

(1) Respond with confession. When the Word exposes an area of sin in your attitudes or actions, quickly respond by acknowledging it so that you will continue to walk in the light.

(2) Respond with faith. Stand upon the truth of what you are reading.

(3) Respond with obedience. Resolve to take the truth you have just seen and put it into practice during the remainder of the day.

Memorization

Definition

In this method, the student of the Word selects portions of Scripture according to a definite plan, commits them to memory, and keeps them memorized by means of periodic review.

Benefits

1. This is the most effective way of making Scripture a part of your thought patterns. The discipline and repetition necessary to memorize a text will plant it deep within your consciousness.
2. Memorization places Scripture at your fingertips, always at your disposal for use on unexpected occasions. It will also enhance your teaching, counseling, and witnessing.
3. "Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You" (Ps. 119:11). The passages you have memorized will assist you in times of temptation.

Steps

1. Purchase or create a set of Scripture memory cards. Look for a good variety of passages that you can use in many situations. (You may want to consider using the Navigators Topical Memory System to build your mental library of verses.)
2. Carry your cards with you and use them during the "dead times" of the day (waiting for an appointment, waiting on line, waiting on hold, waiting in traffic). The key to memorization is repetition, so expose yourself to your new verses briefly but often.
3. Set specific and realistic goals. Try to learn one or two verses a week. Periodically evaluate your progress and make the necessary adjustments.
4. Be sure to review what you have memorized so that it will not gradually slip away from you. The more you have learned, the more important a methodical program of review will become. Otherwise, you will suffer the frustration of losing faster than you learn.
5. Consider the possibility of memorizing a larger portion of Scripture, perhaps a chapter like John 15 or Romans 8, or even a small book like Philippians or Colossians. Memorization is a skill that improves with practice, and after you have mastered a good number of verses, you may be ready to tackle something bigger. One of the advantages of this is that you learn a passage in its context and force yourself to think according to an inspired sequence of concepts. Perhaps the easiest way of memorizing large portions of the Word is to work with it a chapter at a time. Read the chapter several times a week while using a 3x5 card to uncover a each line as you go through it. After a while, you will find yourself guessing more and more of the lines before you reveal them. Once you have learned a chapter, review it regularly to keep it with you.

Meditation

Definition

Meditation is the process of ruminating or chewing on a passage to absorb its life-giving contents. In this method, we focus our attention on a verse or phrase of Scripture or on a biblical concept and reflect upon it one or more times during the day.

Benefits

1. Scripture tells us to meditate on God's revealed truth day and night (see Josh. 1:8; Ps. 1:2; 119:97,148). Meditation directs the conscious mind during the day, and before retiring, programs the subconscious mind during the night. It is an excellent way to practice the presence of God.
2. This method integrates the Word of God into our minds, affections, and wills so that our thinking, emotions, and choices throughout each day are brought into increasing conformity with the truth. In Bible study, we master the Word; in meditation, the Word masters us.
3. Meditation enables us to ponder a passage in depth and so that we can gain meaningful personal insights that we would otherwise have overlooked.
4. This approach to biblical truth is an indispensable part of the process of abiding in Christ. As we abide in Him and His words abide in us, we bear spiritual fruit (see John 15:7-8).

Steps

1. Follow a plan to find appropriate texts for meditation. One way is to meditate on the verses you have already memorized. Gradually go through them by letting each become the theme of one day's meditation. Jim Downing in his book on Meditation suggests another plan which involves the daily reading of every thirtieth psalm, the first corresponding to the day of the month. Five minutes before going to bed, read through the next day's psalms until you find a verse that particularly speaks to you. Then close your Bible, and be sure to make that your last waking thought. If you wake up during the night, think about the verse. In the morning, read through the five psalms with your verse in mind and let it be the theme of your meditation that day.
2. Select specific times for brief interludes of meditation on the verse you have chosen for the day. These could be before meals and coffee breaks or you could use a watch with an alarm to remind you at regular intervals through the day (when the alarm sounds, immediately set it for the next brief meditation break).
3. If you are not working with a verse you have previously memorized, read your verse several times (try doing this aloud) until it becomes easy for you to think through it.
4. Use your imagination and begin to visualize the concepts in the verse in as many ways as you can. Put yourself into the words and into the historical context of the verse.
5. Ponder each word and phrase of the text and try to gain as many insights as you can. Creatively approach it from different angles, and ask the Spirit of God to minister to you through this process.

6. Personalize the passage and make it your own by putting it in the first person and praying it back to God. Commit yourself to pursue and apply the truths you have found in it.

7. Offer praise and worship to God on the basis of your day's meditation.

The Synthetic Method

Definition

In the synthetic method, we study an entire book of the Bible by moving from the parts (verses, paragraphs, major divisions) to the whole in order to discover the flow of thought and the central theme of the book.

Benefits

1. This method gives you a bird's eye view of Scripture and enables you to understand a book as a unit.
2. You will be able to think through the historical and/or logical sequence of the book.
3. Synthetic study gives you a comprehensive picture that will help you see how the pieces of the puzzle fit together. It provides a structure that will organize and integrate the details, so that you will be able to visualize the context of each verse and paragraph.
4. With this method, you will know what is in each paragraph of the book.

Steps

1. Select a book--begin with short and easily outlined books like Ephesians and Colossians.
2. Plan to work with the book at a convenient time and in a consistent way.
3. With a pen and paper ready for your notes and observations, read through the book in one sitting. In this reading, look for the central theme of the book and how it is developed.
4. Read the book a second time and use the questions found in "The Process of Bible Study" above. In the synthetic method, don't get too detailed in your use of these questions. Note problem passages and use the tools to find answers.
5. Read the book a third time and create a title for each paragraph. Follow the **ROSE** guidelines to make your titles crisp and useful:
 - a. Retainable--easy to memorize.
 - b. Original--your very own.
 - c. Short--three or four words.
 - d. Exact--suited to the paragraph.

Be sure to memorize your paragraph titles so that it will be easy for you to think your way through the book.

6. During the fourth reading, go through the book with your **SPECS** on (sins to forsake, promises to claim, examples to follow, commands to obey, summary thought for today), so that you will accumulate practical principles to apply in your life. Record these principles or you will lose them.

7. Now you are ready to develop an original outline of the book. Create titles for the major sections of the book, and use your paragraph titles as well.
8. Finally, write a paragraph to summarize the main theme of the book. Show how each of the book's paragraphs contributes to the development of this theme.

Here is a sample of a synthetic Bible study worksheet which records the results of steps 5 and 6 on the first five paragraphs of Ephesians. There is also a blank worksheet form which you can duplicate (you will need separate pages for steps 3, 4, 7, and 8).

The Analytical Method

Definition

The analytical method of Bible study focuses on the details and particulars of a passage and engages the student in an in-depth analysis of the Word. In contrast to the bird's eye view provided by the synthetic method, the analytical method offers an ant's eye view by getting us immersed in the soil of Scripture.

Benefits

1. God inspired not only the broad themes of Scripture, but all the details as well. Using this method, we will gain an appreciation for the words, nuances, figures of speech, and other particulars of a passage.
2. This method will give us skill in observing and interpreting Scripture as we break it down into its separate components and see how they fit together.
3. Systematic analysis will help us mine the inexhaustible treasures of the Word. We will more clearly see that each time we approach a passage, we can gain new meaning, depth, and insight.

Steps

1. Select a passage for study. Note the paragraph divisions in your translation of the Bible--it is best to analyze one paragraph at a time as you go through the text.
2. Carefully read the paragraph several times.
3. Probe each verse of the paragraph in depth by making observations and asking as many of the questions found in "The Process of Bible Study" as you can. Unlike the synthetic method where you asked broad questions of the passage, in the analytical method you should stop to ask questions on the level of words, phrases, and verses. Record your questions because you will need them for the next step.
4. Use the text and context to find the answers to your questions. For some of them (e.g., historical background, chronology, word meanings), you will need to draw upon the recommended Bible study tools.
5. Accumulate principles from each verse by putting on your **SPECS**.
6. Apply these principles to the eight vital relationships of your life listed in "The Process of Bible Study."

Here is a sample of an analytical Bible study worksheet which records the results of steps 3 through 6 on the first paragraph of Ephesians. There is also a blank worksheet form which you can duplicate for these steps.

Other Methods

Observation, interpretation, correlation, and application

This method is similar to the ask, answer, accumulate, and apply process described above. It has been said that "A wise man will learn more in a walk around the block than a fool will learn on a trip around the world."

In observation, we ask basic questions of the text, look for key words, phrases, and verses, find connecting words and progressions of thought, and discover contrasts and comparisons. In interpretation, we seek to understand the things we have observed to discern the meaning and purpose that the author had in mind. In correlation, we relate the passage we are studying to the overall context and coordinate it with other sections of Scripture. In application, we derive specific principles from what we have learned and seek to implement them in our lives. See Walter A. Henrichsen's *A Layman's Guide to Interpreting the Bible* for a more detailed description of this method.

The topical method

This can be a very fruitful method because it helps us discover the development of a theme through the pages of Scripture. Choose a specific topic and decide whether you wish to trace it from Genesis to Revelation or limit yourself to its use in either a section or book of the Bible or a series of selected verses. You may want to choose a theme like sin, redemption, forgiveness, love, or wisdom. Or you may study a concept like speech, the family, stewardship, or work. Use a concordance (Nave's Topical Bible is also helpful) to find the passages you will work with. Make your observations, ask questions, look for the answers, and then formulate an outline of the topic to organize your key thoughts. Check and supplement your results by using a Bible encyclopedia. Summarize your findings and be sure to end with a set of specific life applications.

The biographical method

A study of the failures and successes of Bible personalities is an excellent way to uncover spiritual principles and discover insights into the way God works in people's lives. If the person you want to study is a major figure in Scripture, you may want to confine your study to a particular book or a portion of his life. Use a concordance to find the relevant passages. As you work with these verses, create a list of the events in the person's life and then arrange them in a chronological sequence. Use this list to create a biographical outline with the associated verses. With this outline, move through the character's life and make a set of observations, interpretations, and applications.

There are a variety of other Bible study methods which could prove useful after you become familiar with those outlined in this booklet. *Effective Bible Study* by Howard F. Vos, for example, describes seventeen approaches, including the

theological, literary, geographical, sociological, political, cultural, and psychological methods.

Recommended Tools for Bible Study

Modern Translation

New King James Version

New American Standard Version

New International Version

Study Bible

The Open Bible

The Ryrie Study Bible

The Thompson Chain-Reference Bible

Bible Survey

Talk Thru the Bible

Jensen's Survey of the Old Testament

Explore the Book

Bible Introductions

Introduction to the Old Testament

A Survey of Old Testament Introduction

New Testament Introduction

An Introduction to the New Testament

Concordance

The New Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible

Young's Analytical Concordance of the Bible

Topical Bible

Nave's Topical Bible

Bible Handbook

The Bible Almanac

The New Unger's Bible Handbook

Eerdman's Handbook to the Bible

Bible Dictionary

The Illustrated Bible Dictionary

The New Bible Dictionary

Unger's Bible Dictionary

Bible Encyclopedia

The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible
Wycliffe Bible Encyclopedia
The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia
Bible Commentary

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary
The Bible Knowledge Commentary
The New Bible Commentary
Bible Atlas

The Moody Atlas of Bible Lands
The Macmillan Bible Atlas
Baker's Bible Atlas

Linguistic Tools

Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament
Englishman's Hebrew and Chaldee Concordance of the Old
Testament
An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words
Dictionary of New Testament Theology

Putting it Together

1. What are the six purposes of Bible study?

Think about this list and use it as a motivation builder that will help you overcome the barriers to your own study of God's Word.

2. What are the six prerequisites of Bible study?

In the spaces at the right, rank these prerequisites from 1 (the prerequisite you have best fulfilled in the past) to 6 (the prerequisite you have least fulfilled in the past).

3. What do you think are the two most important rules of interpretation?

Why did you choose these rules?

4. What are the four A's in the process of Bible study?

Can these be used in any Bible study method? When do you plan to start putting them into practice?

5. What are the SPECS of Bible study?

Be sure to memorize this list and use them until they become habitual.

6. Memorize the eight vital relationships so that they will come to mind when you seek to apply the biblical principles that surface in your study.
7. The only way to discover the benefits of each of these methods is to put them into practice. Plan to do this by using a different method each month until you have gone through them all. Then select the ones you found most beneficial and formulate a future plan to implement them so that you will enjoy a variety of useful study methods.
8. Consider the possibility of forming or joining a group that studies the Bible together. Bible study is best when it is done individually and corporately, because each person can share the insights he or she learned so that others will benefit from them. This adds the dimension of mutual encouragement, exhortation, and accountability, and enables us to gain perspectives on Scripture we would otherwise have missed (see 1 Cor. 14:26; Heb. 10:24-25).
9. Look up these passages that stress the importance of scheduling regular time to study God's revealed Word: Joshua 1:8; Psalm 1:2; 119:105; John 17:17; 2 Timothy 2:15; 3:16-17; Hebrews 4:12; James 1:22. Try committing two of these verses

to memory.

10. Look over this list of recommended Bible study tools and select the first six you would like to have in your library.

Try to purchase them over the next six or twelve months. As you do, familiarize yourself with these tools so that you will know how each one can assist you in your study program.

vii. Using THE OPEN BIBLE helps

A. Biblical Cyclopedic Index

Ways to use it.

B. Christian's Guide to the New Life

Interactive response to each of the six major sections.

C. Visual Survey of the Bible

Focus on applications.

D. Book Introductions

How to use the sections.