

HERE ARE HELPS for
Understanding
the Bible

This is Part 2 of
the book RAISED
INTO NEW LIFE
with additional
comments.

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Printed by PRO-PRINT, Joplin, MO

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Who Is AUTHOR of the Bible?

1

Is the Bible from mere men, or is it from God? What God has made is good. God made us with minds that question, that seek answers. If any message claims to be the words of One who cannot lie or be deceived, what is the right use of human reason in dealing with it?

The Bible includes instructions claiming to have absolute authority to enlighten and rule our lives. It appeals to our judgment to discriminate between its true words and conflicting writings which are not true. In the Bible itself and in the manner of its origin, God gives reasonable evidences and testimonies that enable persons who will do so to decide intelligently concerning its source and authority.

Some say that all Bible statements must be discovered by scientific method, proved by rational processes, or confirmed by results in practice before they can be regarded as authoritative or established truth.

This is simply a demand that God must not be greater than man, and that He must not reveal anything man could not find out for himself with his own closely-limited and earthbound senses. Yet men are only *men*.

It's not because we've tested each Bible statement to be sure we find it true that we believe the Bible is God's book. How could we possibly perform such tests? What human was there to observe when the world began? Or what man can realistically *know* what another man is thinking?

What man can *reliably* know the future? Bible writers could and did. We believe that the One who was there when this universe was made has *in the Bible* told us truly of those incredible events. And of many other improbable things, past and future, which we believe are true because the Bible *says* they are!

2 When God, by special enlightenment through His Spirit, reveals things which eye has not seen, ear has not heard, and which never entered into the heart of man (1 Corinthians 2:6-16), it is foolish and irreverent to try to *prove whether God told the truth*.

It's unreasonable to expect the scope of human (finite) experience and reason to provide the proof of (infinite) things reaching far beyond both human reason and human experience.

A revelation of authoritative and infallible truth gives us a degree and kind of certainty which could never be approached by the incomplete inductions and the fallacy-ridden experiments of scientific methods. The fact that such a revelation HAS been made is established by the best combination of many independent evidences, both of experience and reason. Several of these will be mentioned in this brief study.

It would be thoroughly irreverent and unbelieving for me to question the truth of any message after I have assured myself that it is from the One who made me. If a message truly comes from God, we may be sure that, in the sense that He meant it, the message is unfailingly true.

By the way, we note that God doesn't invite humans to *vote* on what is right and what is wrong in *moral* matters. He tells us what is right and what is wrong. HE made the "laws" of nature. To learn what is right for us to do or not right for us to do, instead of asking our neighbors, we should know to ask God (who made us).

Then if we are wise, **we will do what we understand God says we should do**. Who will claim that God votes in favor of same-sex marriage? Should we vote with God or against Him?

Bible Writers Speak for our CREATOR GOD

Those who read other “holy books” and compare them with the Bible will see remarkable differences. The Bible was written by more than 30 different men over a period of about 1500 years, yet every page reflects one mind.

Men who wrote different parts of the Bible were in most cases unaware that they were writing for posterity. Their audience was by them thought to be persons near them and persons who were alive to read right then or soon after their missive was penned. Without consulting together, they managed to write cohesive truth.

Uninspired men are not apt to easily accomplish this very well even when a committee of 30 might gather at one time around one table to work on just one simple project. A strong reason why I’m convinced the Bible is God’s Word is its unity in purpose (its coherence).

Miracles, prophecies, claims, scope, unity amid diversity, candor of judgment, and the unique character of the Bible message ...these all plainly indicate that *this* book is from some higher source than men unaided.

When GOD speaks, *every man should listen!* His words count for more than even good financial advice which affects only our money. Those who listen to God learn of the dangers men face who “*know to do good, and do it not.*” In human language, Almighty God *has* spoken to us. He calls on us to hear and heed what He, because He loves us, has caused to be said. Hearing is just making the right choices about what we give our attention to. We generally “tune out” many more things than we choose to notice and “hear.”

4 The Bible claims to be from Jehovah God who made the world and all that's in it. Jesus, who says He also is God, invites us to walk with Him on the only Way which leads to God. **Wise people** (we all are called *homo sapiens*) **will use their minds to investigate the Bible's claims!**

Yet it's well that we remember that human wisdom and logic is helpless to determine the right answers to some questions. We should note that no method of science or philosophy can prove [or disprove] some statements which are of central importance in Bible study. For instance:

1) The death of Christ atones for sin (see Romans 3:24-26; 5:6-11; Hebrews 2:9; 10:8-14, Isaiah 53:4-12; Matthew 20:28; 1 John 2:2; 4:10, 1 Peter 1:18,19; 2:24), or

2) Jesus will return to earth and receive us to Himself (promised in John 14:3; Acts 1:11; 1 Thesalonians 4:16,17; and others), or

3) The baptism of a penitent believer in Christ obtains the forgiveness of that believer's sins, and is accompanied by the believer receiving the Holy Spirit! (See Acts 2:38; 22:16, 1 Peter 3:21, and see Viewpoint Study #2 et al).

These and other Bible teachings must be accepted upon the authority and reliability of the One who says it is so. God *knows*, and God has spoken. It's because we recognize the divine mind from which those statements have come that we believe them. Since the Bible is **God's** Word, it's not our privilege to re-write its message. We only accept or reject it. Those who become convinced that the Bible is a word from the Creator should of course use their best efforts to correctly understand God's message. *Then we will live accordingly!*

We have now said that —

1) men do well to investigate the Bible's claims,

2) those who investigate will find convincing proofs, and

3) those who then believe the Bible to be God's Word should live as the Bible teaches.

These are right uses of human reason in relation to divine revelation. Also, it is certainly reasonable, as well as respectful to God, for us to make every effort to determine exactly what He means by what He has said to us.

Writers AND Readers DO Follow RULES

Science is simply man's search for and study of those dependable rules by which God operates everything in His universe. Mortal men must follow rules in every discipline – in laboratories, in factories, in writing, in operating vehicles in traffic ... Because builders obey rules, our bridges and buildings are safe, our planes fly, our automobiles run. Without sensible rules, we'd have chaos in traffic, and daily tragedies caused by unsafe construction.

Let's talk about using *human reason* in understanding the Bible. There are **guides to right reading** which we correctly call, "**Rules** for Right Reading." Lovers of freedom resist rules, but often we each *do* need them! Anarchy is the *absence* of rules.

Writers and speakers do well to follow rules of grammar. Readers and hearers also follow sensible rules to assist us in correct *understanding* (interpreting the intended meaning) of what is said or written.

We note that good reading rules make good sense. Rules we here consider are thought to be merely methods every person uses to gain correct understanding of whatever the person reads or hears. These are principles based upon the nature of the human mind and upon the nature of truth. They are,

6 in fact, inherent in the very structure of language itself.

Any rule for right reading should be logically analyzed and tested by use in subject matter as free from prejudice as possible. Sometimes the effect of emotional bias, the influence of bad examples, the fog of superstition, or some other circumstance, interferes with our normal thought processes, or hinders our usual intellectual honesty. Especially *then*, in order that we may by them be guided back to straight thinking, we need to consider what principles and methods have been generally found to lead to correct understandings of messages men hear or read.

Then, to correctly understand the Bible, we must diligently read and study *the BIBLE!* As with any newspaper, magazine, or book, we'll surely not understand it if we don't carefully read and study the Bible itself.

In His book, God has addressed the human mind in its natural state, in its own language, with its own terminology and speech forms. It's not gobbledygook that can only be understood by the initiates. Understanding God's written Word is not an esoteric art known only to experts or mystics who have been initiated into the mysteries of the art!

I note that some literary works which are called Bible translations DO qualify as gobbledygook by seeming more to *transform* the text than to translate it into understandable common speech. This is less apt to be the case when the work is done by many (a committee working together) rather than by only one real or pretended "scholar."

There are Bible translations into most languages which literate readers can with few difficulties understand. Translations made hundreds of years ago are

recognizably harder to be understood by readers who speak modern languages. 7

The Bible has been considered so different in authority and purpose that methods of interpreting its meaning have been proposed for it which no one would ever use for understanding other plain messages. Because they are not governed by and limited to the actual forms of language used to express the author's ideas, unique methods of study seeking meanings *just for the Bible* could not be expected to yield right results.

Instead of seeking the *author's* intention, some "special" methods for understanding draw upon the imagination of the reader (or some other outside source of ideas) to supply meanings that the author's words themselves do not clearly signify when studied with normal application of common-sense rules for right reading. The Bible is no more difficult to understand correctly than your daily newspaper. In many cases the writers of the Bible are more easily understood than some who frequently write opinion pieces in our newspapers.

In particular, the New Testament writings are a clear Word from God inviting sinners to salvation. We should read the Bible seeking light from God. Light is there for the finding. The Bible is **GOD's** Word. It says our God loves us and wants to save us from sin and death. Not a toy for children to play with, *the Bible instead is a tool for serious adults to use* in seeking to know God and His will for our lives.

The Bible calls for all Christians to love one another and to serve God in one body. Many Christians today ignore this truth. But ignoring it will not make truth go away.

We will be judged by how we lived on earth and whether or not we followed the Word which can be found in the Bible. Those who want to pass life's final

8 exams will surely study the Bible with enthusiasm, eagerly seeking to learn more each day.

Any Bible READER Can Understand What Was Written

Some Bible scholars disagree with the claim that all who read the Bible should be expected to be able to understand it. They think some special spiritual **assistance** is required before readers can understand “*the things of the Spirit.*”

They think of 2 Peter 1:19-21, where Peter writes: *19And we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. Above all, you must understand that **no scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation.** For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:19-21 NIV).*

In some translations, such as the Contemporary English Version (CEV), verse 20 emphasized above is not so clear or correct as it is in the NIV first quoted. The CEV rendering is: “***But you need to realize that no one alone can understand any of the prophecies in the scriptures,***” which seems to imply need for the **reader** to be inspired. It would be a mistake in this case to assume the newer version is the better. It isn’t.

It appears to me that the verse following, when taken with verse 20, sheds light on the intent of Peter in verse 20. He was referring to the one making the prophecy rather than those of us who later hear and/or read the prophetic word.

Even without special divine guidance, readers who follow common-sense *rules for right reading* can and

will understand what God caused the prophet to say. I think Peter did not intend us to understand him to be saying that the Bible can't be understood by ordinary readers. But those who *wrote or spoke for God* could do so only after **they** had heard God's voice telling them what message they were to **deliver** in His name. Those who spoke and wrote for God did so only after HE had told them what He wanted said. This is Peter's message in 2 Peter 1:19-21. **Seth Wilson comments,**

*“PETER here is speaking of the **origin** of prophecies, of the writing, not the reading of them. His parallel expression in verse 21 plainly shows this to be true. The language in verse 20 is best understood to mean, **No prophecy of scripture is of the prophet's own releasing (prompting, or impulse).**”*

Another passage on this same subject is in Paul's letter to the church in Corinth, in 1 Corinthians chapter 2 (actually this subject begins in chapter 1, verse 18). It's the wisdom of GOD rather than the wisdom of MEN which is source for gospel truth. He wants readers then and now to realize that we walk by faith rather than by sight, and that it's GOD we honor and learn from. Paul writes,

We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. No, we speak of God's secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. However, as it is written, “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him,” but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit.

The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within

10 him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned....

Paul says, “WE speak ...” Who does he mean by “we”? To whom does the Spirit reveal mysteries of God? Does Paul mean listeners and **readers** need special guidance in order to receive and understand God’s Word? Some do think so.

Bible WRITERS Speak for God

Seth Wilson also writes,

“A careful study of Paul’s writing in 1 Corinthians 1 and 2 will show that he also is speaking of the need of inspiration by apostles in their receiving the divine word to deliver to others. Paul does not speak of those doing the reading after it had been delivered in written form.

“This view is shown by the context both before and after the verses, and it is in harmony with all the scriptures which call upon men, women, children, masters, and slaves, to read the scriptures for themselves without any reference to special spiritual qualifications.

“In fact, it is the same message, whether spoken or written, which is the instrument of the Spirit in convicting the world and converting the carnal mind.”

I also believe that the gospel, whether oral or written, is the power of God to salvation, as is here

affirmed. Bible writers were inspired. Bible readers can understand what was written. 11

How could the Bible serve as the instrument of convicting and converting if it took a special power from God before the reader could understand its message? I believe it could not do so. Yet we can't understand the Bible without either hearing or reading it.

Bible stories include (in quotes and reports) words of crooks and scoundrels as well as those of God and good men and women. When the Devil's words are reported, does this mean he was speaking truth? By no means! Some Bible words are true. Some are not. Right reading requires us to determine then, even in the Bible, WHO is speaking, and WHEN. The words are important, but even more important is the **who, when, and why.**

In 66 separate Bible books, we read of events spanning the creation of the world and its dissolution. Some of those events may be considered more important than others. Obviously, some words are more important than other words. And some words which were very important to other people may be relatively unimportant to us today. The most important to us are ones applying to us. Of lesser interest should be words which applied to other people and only indirectly (if at all) to us.

Studying the Old Testament is a matter of history. We profit from studying history, but people today are expected to live by the teachings of the *New Testament*. It's Jesus who gives life. The Old Testament says He will come. In the *New Testament* He is revealed!

Understanding God's Word is merely reading it so as to grasp fully and accurately what the author thought he expressed. If we by reading get as much thought from the author's mind as he intended to convey by his words, we have read well. We then have fulfilled the purpose of our reading the inspired

12 Word – to pull out (exegete) the intended meaning.

We have no business putting words in the author's mouth by claiming he said more than he said, or by omitting part of his message that we don't agree with or like, or by saying his words mean whatever *we* want them to mean!

Many in our day don't like what Peter said (Luke reported it in Acts 2:38) on the first Pentecost in church history. But that's what he said just the same. We should learn to *LIKE* what God's men have said and written. *We should accept that what the Bible says is true, and that ALL it says is true, as God's truth!*

The only true (correct and proper) meaning of any Bible passage is whatever the author intended to say. Bible writers are not mystery writers, seeking to withhold the "answer" from the reader until the final page, nor seeking by Delphic utterance to give many conflicting answers in one. Meanings men read into the Bible rather than read from the Bible are not *Bible words* at all.

Even when it is used to express divine truth, the language of the Bible is the language of men, and was meant to be understood. God is *able* to communicate to man. His words then, **can be understood** and surely **will be understood** by sensible men who want to correctly understand them. Yet many do manage to not properly understand God's words!

Words Mean Whatever the WRITER Intended Readers to Understand

Our goal always should be to understand the Bible's words as the writer meant them to be understood. Bible readers are not editors whose duties include changing the message. Our chosen task is to derive from what others have written the full truth *they* were led to express.

To correctly understand the Bible, we 13 DO need to:

- Recognize the meaning of the words as used by the writer,
- Follow the grammatical structure of the sentences as *written*,
- Read each passage in the light of its context,
- Take into account all relevant historical circumstances, and
- Understand each passage in harmony with parallel passages, and in the light of all Bible teaching on the same subject.

These simple, sane, and sensible rules for right reading point to right handling of **Bible texts** or any reasonable communication. We need to recognize the meaning of the words as used by the author. Any word in any language means whatever it is *used* to mean. From their uses, we learn the meaning of words we didn't already know. We recognize that the same word may be used with various meanings by different people and in different areas or departments of their knowledge.

For this reason, the reader who would correctly understand diverse writings must have a broad and accurate understanding of *words* and how they are being used. If he/she does not (and even sometimes when the person does have this knowledge) ridiculous and amusing, or sometimes tragic, misunderstandings occur.

To know how words should be used, the most accurate and complete dictionaries are helpful. But they must be supplemented by continual observation of the various uses being made in the public arena of words in our own language.

Investigation of (Bible) word meanings must be made from the point of view of the **AUTHORS** of passages under consideration. We should give attention

14 to the author's special uses, and to all uses nearest him in time, in territory, and in subject matter.

The writer's own explanation of his language is final and sufficient. It must not be ignored by those who honestly wish to correctly understand what was said. Words of the writer's original expression in his own language are always surer evidence of his meaning than words of any translation.

Our knowledge of word use gained from study of past usage and of word origins (etymology) of words in a translation must not be substituted for etymologies of words in the original language. If we want to study the Bible well, we may need to study the Hebrew and Greek languages used by its authors!

A caution – some “experts” have an axe to grind. The meanings they allege for any word should be accepted only if other reputable (genuine) scholars agree with the “expert.”

Word meanings may be indicated, limited, or affected otherwise, by any or all of the following particulars: Who wrote this? *About what?* In what form? *To whom?* When was it written (under what covenant)? *Under what personal circumstances?* With what helps? *For what purpose?* With what special knowledge of the persons to whom the writing is addressed? *With what related facts that the readers might be expected to know?*

Seth Wilson puts it this way:

“Words are the bricks and boards of which a house of meaning is built. Grammar is the design by which these are put together to create a house rather than a heap. What the author thinks and feels about the things designated by his words is shown by the grammar he uses. Even people who think they know no grammar do grasp the meaning of the most usual and simple grammatical constructions, or they

would not be able to read and speak the language.” So what about Bible words?

Words from God Have Particular Meanings

Before we had telephones so people could speak and listen to one another over wires, we had telegraph and short-wave radio that enabled communication between people who all had learned the (usually Morse) code. But the users had to know and use the same code. They couldn't assign their own preferred meanings to the code bits and then understand the message that had been sent. Words are like that too.

A WORD is accepted by a group of people as the sign of some thought or experience which they have in common. Words we have in common enable us to communicate with one another. Obviously, the words must mean the same thing to the hearers as to the speakers. If not, why call what we're doing communicating?

Dictionaries include listings of normal usages of words there listed. Codes are when some choose to use words abnormally, with meanings different from the usual and accepted. Some segments of society make use of coded speech. By using words with different and unusual meanings known only to the initiates, they disguise their thought from others they want to confuse. But that's not normal. Normally we want our hearers to understand, so we use words in known ways.

God speaks to Bible readers in human languages, expecting to be understood. Therefore, persons who know the language in which it is given, and know facts presupposed to be familiar to original readers, should be able to understand the Bible with the same abilities by which they ordinarily understand all other written messages.

16 God's words have only ONE intended meaning, so if we each understand the Bible correctly, our understandings will be alike except for differences in the degree of fullness of our conception. Because they lack experience, children may not fully understand teachings on matters which many adults comprehend because they've lived through what the child has not yet experienced. And not all adults have reached the same age or level of maturity!

Each person is unique. God has given a written word which can be understood by simple students and which yet challenges the intellect of the most profound thinkers. We learn by experience. Some learn more quickly than others.

It may be that only those who have suffered the loss of a mate or a child will fully understand some of God's consolation in the Bible. The more deeply we study some themes, the more we may comprehend of truth that was always there but that we earlier failed to see.

We should always be willing to study and learn more. How grand it is that some do eagerly "search the scriptures" wanting to learn lessons from God! Note that the better understanding we gain of words, the more apt we are to be able to correctly understand what others say or write.

One who often speaks is most apt to listen well when others speak. One who is master of words is most apt to understand why particular words were chosen or not chosen for this particular use.

We're proud of our children when they learn a new word (generally—some we'd rather they hadn't learned, of course). Pride turns to dismay if they don't soon start to string their words together into sentences. "Mommy" becomes "Mom, may I?" "Dad" turns to "Dad, may I use the car tonight?" Whether or not we always like what they choose to say, we're

proud when our children have learned to communicate their thought in understandable words and sentences.

In our schools, we teach thoroughly and thoughtfully both vocabulary and how words are correctly used. We who sincerely want to understand the Bible are sure to study to learn the difference between nouns, verbs, and other parts of speech.

And we'll study to learn how words are used to clearly communicate the thoughts of the writers. It's not terribly difficult to learn good grammar. Poor knowledge of grammar will detract from our communicating with others, and seriously hamper right reading.

Languages include use of GRAMMAR and Context

Bible writers used words well, and followed normal rules of grammar. We don't need to learn special rules of grammar in order to understand the Bible. Since some concepts are not part of our daily converse, Bible students do learn a few words that we don't frequently use in normal daily conversation.

It's not that the *ideas* are always foreign. Think of the word, "justification." It's one that modern translators are apt to consider too "difficult" for modern readers. But even young children may be called on to "justify" some act they thought no one would notice, and they learn the concept of justifying what they've done. "Justification" is not far from "justifying," so the concept is not all that difficult for most readers. "Grace" is not an unused word apart from the Bible, but is more frequently used there. Some want to reduce Bible vocabulary by omitting all specialized words entirely. And that's not necessary.

Most people who have studied a foreign language can remember instances of students (perhaps themselves) being able to give a meaning for every

18 word in a sentence to be translated, and yet being unable to put together the author's thought. What the student lacked was the ability to perceive the relation of the words to each other, and the meaning indicated by those relations. The "grammar" escaped the student.

Grammar is studied and taught in language courses. This brief study is not a language course. We have pointed out the importance of words, and the necessity of understanding relationships of words to one another. A word's meaning is seen in every different voice, mood, tense, number and person of the verb, and in every other inflection of any part of speech.

It seems likely that any person who wants to correctly handle the Word of Truth may both examine how words are used, and also eagerly *study* the grammar which helps provide the key to right reading. Then we see the words used WITH those we seek to understand.

We've pointed out that language consists of relationships of *words working together*. Proper understanding calls for us to not apply an author's words to something far from the author's purpose and thought. We have no right to misapply (misappropriate) a passage to try to make it seem to say what was not the intent of the writer. In different USES of a word, there is meaning beyond the basic meaning of the word itself. Those who want to be good students of the Bible need to study language as well as vocabulary. Since we want to properly understand, we should study word relations as much as necessary in order to see and accept the grammar used by Bible writers.

We'll remember that our purpose is to learn what **the writer** meant—not to put anyone's thoughts *into* the Bible (to create new ideas), but to receive thoughts *out of* the Bible. As students, our goal is to learn rather than to teach. By means of careful atten-

tion to the paragraph, section, chapter, or book 19
in which any expression occurs, we learn to –

- 1) determine the subject on which *the author* is speaking,
- 2) follow *the author's* course of thought,
- 3) find *the author's* purpose for each word or phrase,
- 4) feel *the author's* own places and matters for emphasis, and
- 5) see *the author's* mental or expressed antitheses – so that the exact sense of the words is shown by the way they fit together.

For proper understanding, we seek to discover what the author considers the opposite of what is said or written. A context which helps our understanding may be remote from the focus of attention, especially (with Paul) in the case of intervening digressions. The full context will usually supply some of the historical facts we also need to consider.

For the context to be properly helpful to our understanding, we must be able to determine what exactly IS the context of any particular word or phrase. Some isolated passages (as many proverbs, for example) may have no context on the same subject. While some contexts are quite limited, or nonexistent, others are extended even to the full length of a book or related books by the same author. Grammar is how words are brought together to express complete thoughts. Context is where and how the thoughts fit *with* one another.

In The Bible, We Find TRUTH and HARMONY

Any intelligent and alert honest man will not knowingly contradict himself. Men may fail in this regard. But God never fails. **Any true statement must be consistent with all related inspired statements and established truths.**

20 Here is where the Bible is different from other books. Inspired writings, when accurately preserved and correctly understood, will never conflict with other inspired writings or with any truth. Yet in rare cases **Bible passages may sometimes seem to conflict with other passages.** Two suggestions may prove helpful toward proper understanding –

1. Passages which are obscure or capable of more than one meaning must be understood to agree with those which are clear and definite in meaning.
2. Those which are general or incomplete in expression must be considered to include or make room for all specific statements on the same subject by the same or any other inspired writer.

We Compare LIKE Passages

Every Bible verse must be allowed to stand and speak its part and never be completely overshadowed or ever denied by another Bible verse. There is some danger in seeking meaning too exclusively by means of parallels. **Every passage must be read as fully as possible in its own context, and by its own wording,** or we cannot even tell whether another passage IS parallel with it.

One passage cannot be a guide to, or a limitation on, the meaning of the other, unless they treat of the same subject! The same WORD may not always be the SAME word. Even when the **same words** may be prominent in two passages, they may still NOT be on the same specific subject. For example, consider the word **faith** in Romans 10:17 and in Romans 14:23.

Romans 10:17 “*Faith comes from hearing...*” 21

Romans 14:1,2,23 “*Accept him whose faith is weak... Whatsoever is not of faith is sin....*”

“Faith” in Romans 10:17 refers to *what we believe about God and His revealed message*. That’s what comes from hearing. In Romans 14, Paul speaks of conscience and *what we think is right or wrong for us or others to do* or not do. We sin when we do what we think is wrong for us to do. Or, of course, when we fail to do what we’re sure we ought to do.

Conscience is not based solely on perceived revelation. But “*faith*” to save us comes by our believing what God says. Following our conscience is different from accepting as true what God tells us by His Word. A syllogism (logical expression aiming to provide proof for a true result) using “faith” from Romans 10 and Romans 14 *as if it had the same meaning in both passages* cannot produce correct results.

Paul addresses this difference in Romans 2:12-16. He clearly points out that men who have done what they thought was wrong (they’ve offended against their conscience) will be held guilty even if they had not heard God’s law against their wicked deeds. In Romans 14, Paul speaks of “disputable” matters, questions of conscience which often trouble Christians who are eager to please God in everything they do. It’s not about church meetings, but about daily living. And Paul encourages them by letting them know that **only when God has spoken to say a thing is wrong is it really wrong** for those whose conscience is clear. Yet, he says, if a person thinks any action is wrong, that makes it wrong for that person. But not for his friend and neighbor unless the friend or neighbor also feels it is wrong.

What God tells us is wrong is of course *always wrong* regardless of how we feel or what we think about it! Yet through exhortations encouraging or discouraging particular acts and motives, He DOES tell us

22 what is wrong. Those are mistaken who think that Paul was teaching that our conscience should only be clear on matters which are specifically or inferentially taught as being necessary parts of Christian living. That's *not* his subject in Romans 14.

Yet many construct doctrinal systems based on the supposed truth that only what is taught in the Bible is acceptable to God. A real knowledge of any Bible subject is formed by observing and comparing all Bible statements relating to that subject, which is by a true inductive investigation of all the available truth.

We repeat – To *properly* understand the Bible, we should always –

- 1) Recognize the meaning of the words as used by the author.
- 2) Accept the grammatical structure of the sentences as written.
- 3) Read each passage in the light of its context.
- 4) Take into account all known relevant historical circumstances.
- 5) Find the meaning which harmonizes with parallel passages, and agrees with all Bible teaching on the same subject.

And thus we've again stated five "rules" for right reading. In these last days, God has spoken to men through His unique Son, Jesus Christ. As earth's moon reflects earth's sun, the Bible reflects God's Son. The Bible is not a NEW book, but was written "long ago and far away."

Historical Circumstances Affect Ancient Writings

Has this ancient writing come down to us unchanged, or has the text suffered some alteration or loss? As more and more years elapse, more possibilities of copying or editing errors occur. Through the

ages since Bible books were written, men of God 23
have made strenuous efforts to preserve the
exact text of books known to be from God.

Scribes of the Jews kept the Old Testament books carefully, copying the books repeatedly by hand with scrupulous checking and rechecking to avoid introduction of any errors. Prior to the introduction of the printing press, copying was always done by hand. Despite the best efforts of the copyists, sometimes errors were made.

Many recent scholars have attempted to determine what the originals actually said. An amazing number of very old manuscripts and manuscript portions of the Bible have been preserved. Although we do not have the original “autographs,” (the actual first writings that were made), we believe that our present texts are actually what the original writers put on their pages. We can read what God caused his men to write. And we will be blessed by the reading.

Our Translated ENGLISH Bibles

Bibles in English are *all* translations. Old Testament books were mainly written in Hebrew, and New Testament books in Greek. The latest Bible book was probably written before the year 100 A.D. No Bible book was written in English, or Spanish, or French, or German, or even Latin (early Italian).

Of course, for our study of the Bible we seek the most accurate and clear translation that can be made. Since the Bible was written in different languages than English, those who don't speak and read the original languages must rely on translators to put the original thoughts into English words which we ordinary (non-scholarly) readers of English will understand as the writer intended them to be understood.

24 It's important then that we read and study from translations made by honest and intelligent and capable persons who succeed in conveying to us God's meaning in words that we can correctly comprehend. When our purpose is correct understanding, the right words are important!

Note also that words may change in meaning over the years. A translation that was good for our grandparents may be very poor for their grandchildren. New words come into use. Old words may no longer be used. The way a word is used may change. Recent translations are apt to reflect those changes. Older ones couldn't possibly do so.

In the late 20th century, as this is written, many Christians who speak English, and many of their preachers and teachers have accepted the New International Version (NIV) as a generally accurate and acceptable translation for our day. NIV translators continue revising that text, and now seem to want to make later versions of it gender neutral (switching from a man to a "person" for instance in some cases, and to men and women when only men are mentioned). If this is done, lovers of God may no longer choose to recommend or use the NIV.

For good reasons, others prefer the Today's English Version (TEV, of the American Bible Society). And Seth Wilson highly recommends the **New American Standard Bible** (NASB). There are several other good translations into English, and a few that are less good. You may want to check out the New King James Version (NKJV). I like the newer **English Standard Version**.

Best are ones made by a committee rather than by one scholar, and ones made by independent scholars rather than a group whose work is directed by one particular denomination. The personal library of any Bible student is apt to include several translations which are frequently consulted.

Understanding PROPHECY 25

Properly

Another proof that the Bible is inspired is that prophets of God foretold many events hundreds of years prior to the time they actually happened, and we can be sure that the prophecy actually was made long in advance of the event. Prophecies from God are always exact and true. Yet they're not always clear until they're fulfilled. Some quite strange understandings of prophecy are heard. How can we know what any prophecy means?

Does God inspire prophets today? We believe any prophetic message which contradicts Bible truths was and is NOT from God. We see no proof that modern prophets are inspired by God.

Modern interpreters of past prophets come up with often-startling suggested meanings, some of which are obviously incorrect. Those who assign a date for the 2nd coming have all been wrong so far. Has Revelation's beast been correctly identified yet? Or "the anti-Christ"?

Many have made guesses and called them inspired understandings. But if the guess turns out to be wrong, we all will know it was only a guess. If it was right it still may have been a guess, of course. The surest guide to the exact meaning of any prophecy is to be found in the facts of the clearly identified fulfillment of the prediction.

When Luke says, "*This is what Joel was speaking of...*" then we can know that the events Luke describes were what God had in mind when He had Joel speak.

When Matthew, Mark, or Luke tells us that Isaiah's prophecy was fulfilled in a particular way, we can be sure that the inspired writer is accurately stating the intent of the prophet. When Jesus says that the prophetic "sign of Jonah" is to be fulfilled by His being in the tomb, we may be sure that the duration and fact of

26 Jesus being in His tomb for parts of three days was known by God when this “sign of Jonah” was first spoken of.

Fulfilled prophecy helps us to realize that the Bible contains God’s words – words from One who knows all things even before they come to pass.

Figurative Is NOT Literal

Words are sometimes used figuratively to designate something quite different from what they usually name, but suggesting some vivid association between the literal and the figurative. If Jesus says He is a door, a gate, or a vine, He does not mean He has ceased being a person. When He asks His friends to eat of particular bread which He identifies as “my *body*,” He does not mean that He is no longer in His body.

Or when a hungry man says, “*I’m starved*,” we realize he has not really starved. He’s only exaggerating. He’s not exactly lying. But his exact words are understandably not entirely true in their usual meaning.

If ordinary, well-established meanings fit the passage being read, readers should not assume a figurative meaning, or any new meaning, was intended by the writer.

We can usually tell easily whether or not the normal word definitions are intended. We let the speaker or writer convey his thought by sympathetically understanding his/her intention.

It’s really true – To correctly and properly understand what others write, readers must –

- 1) Recognize the meaning of the words as used by the author.
- 2) Accept the grammatical structure of the sentences as written.
- 3) Read each passage in the light of its context.
- 4) Take into account all relevant historical circumstances.

5) Find the meaning which harmonizes with 27
parallel passages, and agrees with all other
teaching on the same subject.

And thus we've restated five "rules" for right reading. Bible readers can and should keep these rules in mind. This will help us do the *proper* Bible understanding we want to do!

You're correct in noticing that the only thing here said so far about historical circumstances is that they mustn't be ignored. The context is apt to mention them if they're pertinent.

Following next are comments about implications and inferences. Speakers do sometimes imply things they don't directly say. Yet many infer doctrines they say are Bible doctrines but which are *not* really taught by Bible writers. Some are guilty of reading into Bible passages teachings which are only there in the reader's imagination.

Are INFERENCES (Really) Necessary?

Yes, in order to comprehend and apply the full teaching of a Bible passage, it often **is** necessary to draw some inferences—to see unstated implications which are clearly associated with that passage.

Speakers and writers often intend to convey somewhat more thought than the actual words used might express. We expect the hearer or reader to draw necessary inferences.

One clear statement, when understood and fully accepted, establishes in the mind all the immediate and necessary inferences. These include the converse and obverse of the same expression. Another necessary inference is the refutation of any statement which actually contradicts what we said.

28 In a broad and practical sense, we fully understand any passage only when we can and do safely and accurately draw the immediate inferences.

Note that in drawing even the most simple inferences, our accuracy depends upon the correctness of our understanding of the original statement, not as it appears we may *use* it, but exactly as the author intended his words to be understood.

It's not *right reading* to dodge (to deny) the clear, immediate inference of any truth or command given us by God. Neither, however, should we suppose that the inference WE have read into the writer's words must be similarly understood by every other reader. Some readers get carried away!

Inferences *are* binding on the conscience of the person who sees them. Yet inferences drawn from the Bible but not stated in the Bible must be regarded as human statements liable to human error. To what extent should our inferences be considered equal in authority to what God has actually said? Not at all. The Bible doesn't need our additions!

Reader's inferences must never be made tests of fellowship to separate ourselves from others who cannot see our inferences as the real meaning of divine utterances. We should be careful to NOT misuse inferences.

IMPLICATIONS of Inferences

1) No Bible verse or passage can honestly be used as authority for anything except the one meaning it was intended to convey.

2) No statement in the Bible denies anything except that to which it is essentially opposed.

3) Any passage of Scripture actually supports only those conclusions which must be true if the passage is true. Implications which are merely possible or

even probable are not the same as really necessary inferences. 29

4) Analogies may clarify affirmation, or indicate its probability, but they furnish no positive proof of any inferential conclusion.

5) There cannot be proof for more in the conclusion of any logical thought than is actually contained in the premises or evidence from which it is drawn.

As our conclusions, inferences may be taught freely. But they should *not* be taught as if they were clearly stated words from God, for they are not. Doctrine based on *human* inferences is not teaching from God.

It is often true that errors are committed in the use made of passages or phrases to construct conclusions or systems of doctrine. Such errors are not based on simple reading of the Word. The error is in our use of what we read. Many sincere Bible readers seem able to put 2 and 2 together and get 7 if they feel the 7 is devout enough! Others add 2 and 2 and get 22. But the correct answer is still 4.

*Bible writers contrast
God's GRACE with Justification
Through Keeping Laws*

Some who think of the gospel AS IF IT WERE LAW suggest we must search the New Testament to find justification for every act we perform as Christians. With special interest in Christian assemblies, they speak of “*commands*” and “*necessary inferences*” and “*examples which (they say) have the force of commands.*”

These students are apt to think God is much more interested in what we do when we're together than during the much longer periods when we're alone with Him or busy in daily life. No such emphasis is found in the New Testament.

30 To such readers, the New Covenant is only another law code. It's just like the Old Testament as they see it except that the laws are not spelled out clearly by God. It's up to their editors and designated experts to tell everyone exactly what the *new* law requires. They've developed a "*Christian law code*" in which whatever is not required is not permitted.

Their understanding is that if Jesus or His apostles say to do a thing, we must without exception do it. If they didn't say we had to do it, unless they speak approvingly of others doing it, we don't *dare* do it.

Unless, that is, their "lawyers" can cause the Bible to seem to say what they want it to have said to forbid or to require any particular teaching or practice. If they want them to be so, inferences are necessary. Examples are "*binding*" if they want them to be. It seems that any Bible passage means whatever they want it to mean.

This is not good reading, nor in fact is it the Christianity of the Bible. Many religions, including the Jewish religion, *are* based on legalism, but **the gospel of Christ is not a code of law.**

Paul sums up our religion by pointing out three abiding characteristics of Christianity, which are faith, hope, and love. He says, "*The greatest of these is love.*" That's LOVE, not law. And *that's* Christianity! Rather than having earned salvation by our good works, we're saved by grace through faith FOR good works (Ephesians 2:8-10).

Rules for RIGHT reading (in other words, proper Bible understanding) lead us to an understanding of the gospel which is quite different from a code of law. Jesus gave no code of laws. His apostles gave no code of laws. Those who prefer to live by law *create* their own rules and regulations. No code of laws is contained in the New Testament, but men have created

many laws out of phrases and inferences from that text. 31

Paul encourages us to realize that the gospel sets us *free*. It gives us *life*. It causes us to *love* God and to love all who are loved by Him. Legalism does none of the above! Any Bible reading we do which leads us to love ourselves and our thoughts and our practices and our ways, and to despise those who do not also love us supremely, is somehow skewed. It's not right.

Whatever our rules for reading were, we've not read the Bible rightly if our reading makes us think of ourselves (and/or our logic and/or our opinions) more highly than we ought to think. **If we choose to follow them**, Seth Wilson's rules proposed and presented in this study will lead us to *right reading*, which should lead to right *understanding* and, if our heart is good, to right *living*.

This will take us all (together, in unity) to glory with God and His Son, Jesus Christ. We need to read the Bible more, and then put its clear (clarity makes them "proper") teachings into practice in our lives.

This will result in our having LOVE, JOY, AND PEACE in our hearts. Right reading of the Bible is also apt to give us a strong desire to be in unity here on earth with all others who also love Jesus.

This is "proper" Bible understanding! — **SETH WILSON, w/Ray Downen**

Ray Downen recommends the reading of a "devotional" book about Revelation by Matt Proctor. Printed by College Press of Joplin, MO, the book **Victorious** encourages the reading of John's Revelation and points out many helpful things about the Revelation.

All currently available Viewpoint tracts & booklets are linked at <http://missionoutreach.org/CU-Go1.pdf>. Topics are: CD-Doctrines of Jesus & His apostles, CE-Evangelism by Christians, CU-Unity IN CHRIST, CW-Worship of the Christ (It's by serving Him), DL-Daily Living by Christians, FA-Salvation Is Not by Faith

32 Alone, HS-Holy Spirit Working in Christians, NB-New Birth INTO Christ's church, and PB-Proper Bible Understanding.

Other brief Bible studies like this one are also available from Mission Outreach: [NB-B01](#) "How to ENTER Christ's Way," [NB-B02](#) "Preface to 'Were You BURIED with Christ?'," [NB-B03](#) "Introducing 'Do Peter's KEYS still open the Way?'," [CD-Co4](#)—"What Does Jesus Say About Himself?" [CD-Go1](#)—"What About False Teachers?" [CD-Co5](#)—"What About True Apostles?"

Your attention is invited to booklets on becoming a Christian. One title is "Three Times Peter used the KEYS of the Kingdom" (Viewpoint study [NB-K01](#)). You may also be interested in "We are invited to enter into COVENANT with God," by Boyce Mouton (Viewpoint study [CD-F03](#)). As does this study, it speaks of freedom in Christ based on love of truth and love of the unity Jesus planned for us.

If we do not die to sin, we cannot live with Jesus Christ! Those who want to find freedom and life in Jesus of Nazareth do well to read and believe the Bible. Jesus built a "family of faith" (the word we use is "church") where those who believe in Him gather to help one another in the Way which leads to life. Please join us in a Christian church.

Ray is a member of IRON GATES CHRISTIAN CHURCH which meets at 2310 Iron Gates Road in Joplin, MO. Ray says it's one of the many fine churches in the Joplin area. He also recommends Villa Heights Christian, Mt. Hope Church of Christ, 26th & Connecticut Church of Christ, and others too numerous to mention.

Iron Gates church meets at 9:30 Sunday mornings and at 5 p.m. Sunday and Wednesday evenings.



PHOTO BY
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A Viewpoint Bible Study from Ray Downen

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