

# How to Study the Bible

An Excerpt from *Multiply* by Francis Chan

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## Studying Logically

An academic study of Scripture does not ensure a proper interpretation. If studying the Bible were all about academics, then our best bet would be to find the most intelligent person we know, and have him or her interpret it for us. But while it's true that rigorous study does not guarantee right results, it does not mean that hard work and a logical approach to Scripture is insignificant. Not only is it helpful, it is necessary and commanded:

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth. (2 Tim. 2:15)

God calls you to “do your best.” Laziness is inexcusable. We are studying the very words that God chose to communicate to us, so in addition to studying prayerfully and obediently, we must study diligently. **God calls us to love Him with our minds (Matt. 22:37), so it is an act of worship to use our minds to understand His thoughts, which in turn will lead us to love Him even more.** We tend to listen carefully when there are consequences for not listening. It's like misunderstanding driving directions and ending up lost and frustrated. How much more important is it to truly understand what God is telling you? As Christians, we claim to base our lives upon the teaching of the Bible. But what if we misunderstand that teaching? The fact of the matter is that we all misunderstand certain passages of Scripture. If we all understood the Bible perfectly, we would all agree on every point of doctrine. Clearly this is not the case. There are many factors that lead us to misunderstand what the Bible is saying: our own assumptions, blindly following the views of people who have been influential in our lives, our sinful desire to do our own thing, etc. All of these factors are only intensified when we don't pay close attention to what the Bible is actually saying, rather than what we think it must be saying. It is good for us to keep in mind some general principles for interpreting Scripture.

## Consider the Context

**Every text belongs to a context.** Every chapter, paragraph, sentence, and word derives meaning from its relationship to the words, sentences, paragraphs, and chapters around it. This is true in reading ordinary books, and it is certainly true in reading the Bible.

Consider the simple word ship. We all know what the word means (and even if we didn't, we could easily find its definition in a dictionary). But ship means different things in different contexts. How do you decide whether ship is referring to a large boat or to the process of sending something? You look at the context. This isn't a complicated process, but it is absolutely essential in determining the meaning of the word. We don't usually think about this because reading words in their context is second nature to us—it probably hasn't even occurred to you that you're thinking in terms of context right now, as you read these sentences. As you read, you are deciding what these words mean based on the words around them. When you run into an ambiguous

word (like the word “read” in the last two sentences, which could be taken as past or present tense, depending on the context), you automatically choose the appropriate definition or tense based on the context. The point of using these simple examples is to highlight an essential aspect of studying the Bible: in order to understand a particular word, verse, chapter, or book, we need to consider it in light of its context. Too often, verses are read and quoted in isolation. While this is not necessarily wrong, it greatly increases the chances of misinterpretation. Here’s a helpful way to get the point across: **when studying Scripture, think apple rather than orange.** Typically, when you eat an apple, you take a bite out of the whole fruit. When you eat an orange, you break it into isolated pieces and then eat the pieces individually. Whenever we read a verse, we should be mindful that we are taking a thought (a “bite”) from a larger story. Always keep in mind that every verse is connected to a chapter, a book, and the entire Bible.

One of the best things we can do to understand context is to read the Bible in its entirety. Some choose to do this every two years, others on a yearly basis, and others even more frequently. Whatever approach you take to reading the Bible, the more often you read it, the better you will understand the whole story.

*1. Think about the way you tend to study the Bible. Would you say that you make an effort to seek out what the Bible is actually saying? Do you pay attention to the context? If so, how has this helped you? If not, how do you think this might change the way you read the Bible?*

### **Know the Difference between Interpretation and Application**

Maybe the most common mistake made in Bible interpretation is when people focus too much on “what this verse means to me.” It’s not uncommon for Bible study groups to go around the circle as each person shares an individualized interpretation. Often these interpretations are made with little study and are heavily influenced by opinion and desire. Many times, the various interpretations are incompatible with one another. In this type of setting, the focus is not on what God is saying through the Bible. Instead, each person is focused on what he or she thinks the verse means. Whether it’s clearly articulated or not, this approach reveals the assumption that the Bible has a personalized meaning for each Christian. It might mean one thing to me, but another thing to you. I don’t want to completely disparage this approach. For one thing, many biblical passages have nuances of meaning, and you might notice something that others miss. In that sense, “going around the circle” can be a very helpful exercise. But this is not the same thing as saying that the Bible has a personalized meaning for each of us. Once we head down that road, there is no longer such a thing as “misinterpretation,” and people are free to make the Scripture say anything. It’s important to understand that the Bible means what God intends for it to mean. When we ask our children to wash the dishes, we have a clear message we want to get across, and we expect them to figure out what we mean by that statement. In the same way, God has a message to get across, and we all need to work together in order to examine God’s words and find out what He is really saying to us.

**Sometimes when we talk about “what this passage means to me,” we are actually talking about application, rather than interpretation.** With interpretation, we are asking what the passage is saying and what it means. With application, we are applying that meaning to our specific situation. Ultimately, each passage has one meaning, but it might have many different applications. For example, in Matthew 22:39, Jesus quoted Leviticus 19:18, which says, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” The meaning is pretty easy to grasp: we need to love the people whom God has placed around us. But how do we apply that truth to our lives? One person might apply it by helping a neighbor with her yard work, and another person might apply it by listening

graciously to a coworker as he shares his concerns about his family. They might each apply the same truth to their lives in different ways tomorrow. Application depends on our specific life situations, so we may all read the same passage and walk away with different applications. Interpretation, on the other hand, is all about discovering what God has actually said and what He intended to communicate. We should all read the same passage and walk away with the same meaning.

## Find the Plain Meaning

Sometimes our personal agendas or assumptions divert us from what God is saying in a biblical passage. For example, in Luke 12:33, Jesus said, “Sell your possessions, and give to the needy.” We will often read a verse like that and say, “Okay, obviously God is not asking me to literally sell my possessions and give to the needy. This passage must mean \_\_\_\_\_.” Really? Because it sure seems that Jesus is saying that these disciples should literally sell their possessions and give to the needy. In fact, looking at the context of Jesus’s teaching and ministry only strengthens the literal meaning of that passage. Based on the rest of the book of Luke, this is exactly the sort of thing that Jesus would call His followers to do. The fact that Jesus called His disciples to sell some possessions at that moment in history does not necessarily mean that every Christian has to sell every possession at all times, but the point is that our own agendas can keep us from even considering such a thing. If Jesus called His disciples to sell some of their stuff and use that money to meet the needs of the poor, shouldn’t we be open to His calling us to do the same thing today? We need to learn to take Scripture at face value. While some sections of the Bible are difficult to understand (2 Pet. 3:16), so much of the Bible is easily understood. When we read that “those who are in the flesh cannot please God” (Rom. 8:8), we will have to carefully study the verse and its context to decide what it means to be “in the flesh,” but the plain meaning of the verse is clear: God does not want us to be in the flesh. Other passages are more difficult. What happens when we read one of the many portions of the Old Testament that seem so distant?

In Exodus 17, for example, Israel goes to war against Amalek. As Joshua lead the army in battle, Moses sat on top of a hill and kept his hands raised in the air. The Bible says, “Whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed, and whenever he lowered his hand, Amalek prevailed” (Ex. 17:11). This is a fascinating account, but how do we interpret it? We will probably all agree that the verse isn’t telling us to go sit on a hilltop and hold our hands in the air. Should we be seeking a spiritual meaning that lies beneath the surface, then? Maybe the verse means that we must keep our hands and our hearts pointed toward heaven if we are going to defeat our spiritual enemies. While that may be true, there is no indication that this is what God is telling us through this passage. If we are going to take this verse at face value, we will read it as a description of the unusual way in which God used Moses to lead Israel to victory in a historical battle over the Amalekites. Through that story we can gain insight into the power of God and His ability to save His people, but those insights do not change the clear meaning of what God recorded in Exodus 17. It might seem more “spiritual” to try to find some deeper meaning behind the text, but what could be more spiritual than simply taking God at His word? The Bible is a fascinating book. It is the communication of the Creator of the universe to His people. God wrote the Bible using human language, in words that we understand and use every day. He chose to communicate through a book, and He obviously has the ability to communicate His message clearly. If we say that we shouldn’t take God’s words at face value, that we need to discover some sort of hidden meaning beneath the plain meaning of the words of Scripture, then we are saying that God is using human language in a way that is different from the way human beings use language. But we have absolutely no indication that this is the case. To the contrary, when God spoke to human beings in the Bible, they understood Him and acted according to the plain meaning of His words. When God told Israel to build a tabernacle, they didn’t perform some sort of

dance as a spiritual interpretation of His words. Instead, they took His words at face value and created a tabernacle in accordance with the plain meaning of God's words. Our approach to Scripture should be the same.

*In your own words, why is it important to look for the plain meaning of each passage rather than seeking out a deeper meaning?*

### **Take the Bible Literally**

There is an old statement that is worth repeating here: **if the literal sense makes sense, seek no other sense.** We need to be careful with this, because we are still left to determine when the literal sense actually makes sense. But it makes an important point: we should look for the plain meaning of the words of Scripture. When we examine each word, verse, chapter, and book, we need to allow the context to suggest whether that verse should be taken as a literal statement, a rhetorical question, a figure of speech, etc. Accepting the Bible as literal truth does not mean that we interpret every passage literally. When we read the Bible, we find many places where the author uses metaphors, parables, poems, prophecies, and other literary devices. For example, when Jesus said, "I am the door" (John 10:9), He was using a metaphor. We understand that He was not claiming to be made of wood and attached to a doorframe. Jesus was conveying literal truth, but using a figure of speech to do so. But notice that this is not using any sort of strange spiritual or allegorical interpretation. We are following the normal usage of human language, which allows for metaphor, imagery, and other rhetorical devices. So when we say that we need to take the Bible literally, we need to be careful to understand what we're really saying. What we mean is that we will take the Scriptures at face value, and when the context suggests that the author is using a figure of speech or some sort of poetic or prophetic imagery, then we will follow the normal rules of human language and interpret the passage accordingly. Don't misunderstand—this isn't always a simple task. As an illustration, consider the fact that whole camps have formed over which portions of the book of Revelation should be read literally and which should be read figuratively. We will often disagree over which specific passages are speaking literally and which ones are using rhetorical devices. This means that we need to be gracious as we discuss the Bible. There is room for discussion and exploration—in fact, it glorifies God when we humbly and patiently examine the Bible together. The point is simply this: take God's words at face value and do what He tells you to do.

### **Study the Grammatical Context**

As we have seen, God used human language to write the Bible. He led human authors to use human words and human grammar in order to record His truth. So it only makes sense to pay attention to the grammar of the Bible. This doesn't mean that you need to be a grammatical expert to read the Bible (though God does give these people to the church to guide the rest of us), but we should pay attention to how the words in the Bible are being used. The biblical authors often pay very close attention to grammar. To give one example, Paul made a significant theological point based on the use of a singular noun (rather than a plural) in Genesis 12:

Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, "And to offsprings," referring to many, but referring to one, "And to your offspring," who is Christ. (Gal. 3:16)

This doesn't mean that we will always find interpretive gems by examining the grammar, but when we come to difficult passages, we will want to ask questions like the following:

- Who is doing the action here? (Find the subject)
- What action is the actor performing? (Find the verb)
- How are the actor and the action described? (Find the adjectives and adverbs)
- Who or what is being acted upon? (Find the direct and indirect objects)

Most of the time, we do this sort of analysis automatically, without even thinking about what we're doing. (You just did it with the previous sentence, and now you're doing it again.) But when you encounter a passage that seems difficult, try breaking it down and examining what is really going on with each sentence. God's words are worth evaluating at this level.

### **Study the Historical Context**

The historical setting of a passage will often shed light on what the passage means. Sometimes this will require outside resources, like a study Bible, Bible dictionary, or commentary. But many times the historical insights can be found in the Bible itself. For example, much of the Old Testament consists of detailed historical accounts. And many New Testament books give historical insights—particularly the Gospels and the book of Acts. Consider just one example of how the historical setting can help us understand the Bible. Walk into any Christian bookstore and you will find decorative knick-knacks bearing Jeremiah 29:11: "For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope." People love it because they interpret it as God saying He will keep us from harm and bless us. But is that really what Jeremiah intended to communicate to us? If we look at the historical context, we find that Jeremiah was writing to Jewish exiles in Babylon. They had gone into captivity as punishment for their lack of faithfulness to God. Jeremiah told them that they would be in captivity for seventy years, so they should settle in and seek to bless Babylon while they were there. And then comes Jeremiah 29:11. God promised that He did indeed have a plan for His people, and He would restore them to the land of Israel after their days of exile were over. The historical context reveals that Jeremiah 29:11 is not a blankcheck promise from God that nothing bad will ever happen to any of us today. We have much to learn from God's provision for Israel in the midst of their exile and punishment. We can even make observations about God's compassion in this story and trust that this same compassionate God will care for us today. But we would be misusing Scripture if we assumed that those words could be directly applied to every circumstance as a promise of prosperity. The historical context does not always affect the meaning of a passage, but we must always consider who the biblical authors were addressing and why.

*In your own words, explain why paying attention to the grammatical and historical context is important. How should these concepts shape your study of the Bible?*

### **Let Go of Your Baggage**

As important as it is to pay attention to the context of the passages we read, the greatest danger in biblical interpretation comes from our own "baggage." For example, many Americans assume that Jesus is a white,

blond-haired, blue-eyed capitalist who bleeds red, white, and blue. But that is simply not the case. We often assume that God wants us to be happy, healthy, and fulfilled because that's the message we get from everyone around us. But again, that's not the case. Read the Bible carefully and you'll see that God doesn't necessarily want those things for us, at least not in the way our culture defines and pursues them. Life experiences can also taint the way we read the Bible. Those abandoned or abused by their fathers may struggle more to understand what the Bible says about our loving heavenly Father. Those who were raised with few rules and weak parents may have a hard time seeing the power and sovereignty of God. Our experiences have an impact on our desires, which in turn affect our interpretations. When we read the Bible, we need to do everything we can to avoid making assumptions about what the Bible is saying. We need to let it speak for itself. We are all tainted by the commitments and assumptions of our culture. We also have been heavily affected by our life experiences, but the more we let go of our baggage and ask God to speak directly to us through His Word, the more we will find God's truth transforming our minds and actions, and the better we will understand the mind of God.

*What would it mean for you to read the Bible with an awareness of your own baggage and a willingness to get rid of those assumptions for the sake of understanding God's truth more clearly?*

### **A Note on Application**

Don't forget what you read in the session. Accurately interpreting the Bible is not the final step. The purpose of reading and interpreting the Bible is obedience and fellowship with God. If we interpret Scripture perfectly, yet fail to live in accordance with what we read, we are fooling ourselves (James 1:22). God has given us the precious gift of the Bible so that we will be transformed by its truth, becoming more like Him and growing in our love for Him.