

April to June 2020
Teenz RPG Series on

How to study the Bible

How do I Study the Bible?

Do pray for the Holy Spirit's guidance before you begin your devotional time, for unless the Spirit reveals the meaning, we cannot understand scripture (1 Corinthians 2:10). Then you must read the scripture text; please don't be tempted to read the devotional alone without reading the Bible. Memorizing the scripture text will help you meditate upon it (Psalm 1:2), even long after you have finished your devotional time. After reading the devotional, always end with self-reflection: compare yourself against the standard of God's Word, and humbly yield to the Holy Spirit to direct you towards that standard (James 1:23-25). Be ye doers of the Word, not hearers only!

At the end of this series, may you be able to say as David said,

*"O God, thou art my God; early will I seek thee: my soul thirsteth for thee,
my flesh longeth for thee in a dry and thirsty land, where no water is."*

(Psalm 63:1)

May all glory be God's alone!

Dn Milton Ang

On behalf of the Teenz RPG committee

WHAT IS HERMENEUTICS?

“Hermeneutics” is defined by theologians as “the science and art of the interpretation of the Bible”. It is a science because it involves principles within an ordered system which help us interpret the Bible properly. It is also an art because it involves the skill of the interpreter in the application of these principles. Of course, as this is not just any book, but the very words of God, hermeneutics cannot merely be an intellectual exercise which involves only the person’s mind. It must also involve the person’s heart, for it is a spiritual exercise.

A good example from the Bible of the practice of hermeneutics can be found in the book of Nehemiah. Following the completion of the rebuilding of the wall in Jerusalem, the people gathered together to worship the Lord on this special day. The Bible was opened, and read publicly by Ezra the priest as well as the Levites (Nehemiah 8:6-7). However, they did not just stop there – after reading, they carried on and “*gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading*” (Nehemiah 8:8). They were basically explaining the meaning of the text, and helping the people to understand what God’s Word says. This was hermeneutics in action!

It may seem entirely logical to approach the interpretation of God’s Word from a “neutral” position, meaning to study God’s Word with an “open mind”. However, the Lord Jesus Himself said that when spiritual things are concerned, “*He that is not with me is against me...*” (Matthew 12:30). That means that in order to study and interpret God’s Word accurately one must approach God’s Word with the uttermost reverence, acknowledging that “The Bible is none other than the voice of Him that sitteth upon the Throne! Every Book of it, every chapter of it, every verse of it, every word of it, every syllable of it, every letter of it, is the direct utterance of the Most High! The Bible is none other than the Word of God: not some part of it more, some part of it less; but all alike, the utterance of Him who sitteth upon the Throne; faultless, unerring, supreme!” (Dean Burgon Oath).

Thought: We should ask not if certain parts of God’s Word are true but rather how we can better understand the truths of His Word.

Prayer: Thank You, O Lord, for the gift of Your Word which delivered me from darkness into Your marvelous light.

WHY IS HERMENEUTICS IMPORTANT?

God’s Word is perfect, and it has been perfectly preserved through the ages in order that man can come to know of Him and of the Lord Jesus Christ. Indeed, we are saved by Jesus Christ the Living Word through the Gospel which is found in the written Word, the Bible.

But if God’s Word is perfect, then why do we need proper interpretation in order to get a right understanding of it? Why are there certain parts of the Bible that are so difficult to comprehend? The problem is not with God’s Word itself, but rather it is because God’s Word is given to a fallen race of sinners whose intellect and understanding of spiritual things is imperfect. Therefore, a system of interpretation is critical to help us to correctly grasp God’s Word. This is where hermeneutics comes in.

The principles of hermeneutics are the tools which one uses to correctly interpret the Bible. Without correct hermeneutics the Bible would be open to many different and erroneous interpretations. Obviously, this goes against the principle that the truth of God’s Word is absolute. There is no room for multiple views when it comes to the truth of God’s Word.

When the right principles are applied, and God’s truth is accurately conveyed and understood, then the power of God’s words upon His people would be readily evident. This was seen in Nehemiah’s time, for after he caused them to understand the Word, the response was that *“all the people wept, when they heard the words of the law”* (Nehemiah 8:9). They were pricked in the heart by their disobedience to God, and mournfully wept tears of repentance. These are the results that one can have when right hermeneutics are applied.

When the principles of hermeneutics are applied correctly, believers will be greatly blessed through the right understanding of God’s Word. There will not only be true repentance and mourning for sins, but also *“great mirth, because they had understood the words that were declared unto them”* (Nehemiah 8:12). The joy of the LORD will be our strength, for we have the full understanding of His Word!

Thought: Every truth proclaimed through God’s Word is so precious that I must avoid misinterpreting any part of it.

Prayer: O Lord, thank You for blessing us with sound minds and the illumination of the Holy Spirit so that we can know Your Word.

WHAT IS THE PRIMARY AIM OF INTERPRETATION?

The aim of interpretation is simply for one to correctly understand God’s Word and also to gain a deeper understanding of it. Note how diplomats from different countries who do not speak the same language engage interpreters to help them understand each other. If the interpretation is not done correctly, the consequences of miscommunication at high-level meetings between world leaders could be disastrous. Just a single word translated wrongly could lead to far greater consequences, possibly even that of war. World leaders recognise this and take great pains to ensure that this is avoided.

For us as Christians, we are to handle the Word of God even more carefully because the consequences are spiritual in nature and can affect us or the people around us for eternity. This is why 2 Timothy 2:15 tells us to “*study to shew thyself approved unto God*”. To study God’s Word is not merely to read and remember but also to diligently work at gaining a deeper and proper understanding of God’s Word, working hard at it like a labourer in the field would sweat and toil under the scorching sun. We are also told to rightly divide God’s Word. Dividing God’s Word can be likened to a biologist who, having dissected his specimen, scrutinises it and documents every minute detail of what he observes under the microscope. Likewise, we are to dwell on God’s every Word and understand not just the general meaning behind Bible passages but also to know why God uses certain words, phrases and tenses in the Bible in their respective contexts. This involves much time, diligence and attention to detail. When we do so, the Bible assures us that we can be like a workman approved of God, for God takes delight in His children when they take His Word seriously, put in the effort to understand it better, and draw closer to Him.

Unlike every other book ever written, the Bible stands apart and above the rest in its inerrancy, wisdom and richness. To simply be satisfied with just a superficial understanding without delving more deeply into its marvelous truths, or even worse, to misinterpret it, is to deny ourselves the best education possible. Hermeneutics is therefore the tool which can help us to this end for our spiritual benefit, and protect us from the dangers of false teachers and false doctrines.

Thought: The key to having the mind of Christ and a close walk with God is through studying and rightly dividing His Word.

Prayer: Reveal to me, O Lord, the rich treasures of knowledge and wisdom hidden in Thy Word.

IS THERE ONLY ONE INTERPRETATION?

The Bible describes the Lord Jesus Christ as One who is the same yesterday, today and forever (Hebrews 13:8) and the Heavenly Father as One who has no variableness, neither shadow of turning (James 1:17). Also, whatever He says stands, and stands forever. Indeed, Psalm 33:11 says, *“The counsel of the LORD standeth for ever, the thoughts of his heart to all generations.”*

Since God is not a God of confusion but is perfect, single-minded, wise and immutable, it logically follows that the truths which He reveals through His Word do not change with time or have double meanings that would cause confusion to those who study it. This means that there can only ever be one correct interpretation of His Word.

However, there are passages in the Bible that are difficult to interpret. Because hermeneutics is as much a science as it is an art, even the correct application of hermeneutics by faithful students of the Word can yield different results. This does not mean that there is more than one interpretation. Rather, it is a problem with imperfect and fallible interpreters who are unique individuals. They may apply the same steps of biblical hermeneutics and yet yield different results. Their understanding of God’s Word and interpretation of it may then differ. That is why 2 Peter 1:20-21 teaches us that interpretation of Scripture is never a private and purely intellectual endeavour, but one that is spiritual, guided by the Holy Spirit. Thus as we strive to interpret every passage rightly, we must constantly rely on the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and not our own minds and wills.

Haven’t we often heard enthusiastic (and at times even heated) exchanges between sincere Bible-believing Christians who disagree with the meaning of certain passages in the Bible? The conversation often ends with both parties saying “well, that’s just your interpretation of it”. Perhaps what is necessary here is to humbly acknowledge that we need to prayerfully go back to search the scriptures more closely and ask for the Holy Spirit’s illumination to show us the one true meaning of the particular passage, while at the same time resist the tendency to take on a judgmental attitude towards those who hold differing views but still uphold the fundamental tenets of the faith.

Thought: If God’s truth were to be open to man’s interpretation we would ultimately have no assurance of our salvation in Christ.

Prayer: Thank You, Almighty God for Your absolute truths without which we would be swayed by every wind of doctrine.

IS REGENERATION REQUIRED TO INTERPRET?

We read in 2 Peter 1:21, *“For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost”*. This tells us that God’s Word has a spiritual origin which is God Himself. It was given to man by the Holy Spirit, making the Bible a divinely inspired book of spiritual truths. It involved human authors whom God described as “holy men”, meaning these men were saved and were indwelt by the Holy Spirit. If the origin, revelation and recording of God’s Word are all of a spiritual nature, it therefore follows that receiving and understanding the Word of God (interpretation) must also be a spiritual exercise.

This is why Jesus told Nicodemus that *“except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God”*. One can be receptive to the Spirit’s guidance only if he is truly born again and indwelt by the Spirit (i.e. saved, spiritually regenerated). Only then would his spiritual eyes be opened, to be able to see and understand heavenly, eternal matters. Likewise, 1 Corinthians 2:14 says that the natural (unsaved, spiritually unregenerate) man cannot receive the things of the Spirit of God. Without the illumination of the Holy Spirit, no person can understand, accept and conduct himself according to God’s Word. To be regenerated or born again is therefore a pre-requisite for the proper interpretation of God’s Word.

Soon after the Asian Tsunami in 2004, Dr. Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury (head of the Anglican Church), questioned the existence of God due to the immense death and suffering resulting from it. Undoubtedly as a theologian, Dr. Williams should have been very familiar with Matthew 24 regarding the end-times, where Christ had forewarned of the escalating catastrophes that would occur as a sign of His return. In spite of this, his reaction to the Tsunami reflected how Matthew 24 had not impacted on him at all. An unregenerate theologian will neither defend nor accept what the Bible says in times of severe testing. How can he be trusted to interpret God’s Word faithfully?

Thought: An unregenerate person interpreting God’s Word is like a doctor performing surgery with only theoretical knowledge.

Prayer: Thy Word is power indeed, O Lord, for not only does it quicken souls but it also transforms hearts and minds.

IS FAITH REQUIRED TO INTERPRET?

Hebrews 11 gives us a beautiful description of faith. It is the substance of things hoped for, and the evidence of things not seen (Hebrews 11:1). Faith gives us the ability to be utterly convinced that God spoke the world into existence by the power of His Word, that the physical universe which we can see and touch was created by the unseen yet very real power of God (Hebrews 11:3). However, unless we have faith, we would not be able to believe these things that God had done. We would not be able to wholeheartedly take God at His Word. This is why it is impossible to please God without faith (Hebrews 11:6).

The faithless would say “seeing is believing”. Therefore to them, all the miracles found in the Bible are, at best, mere fairy tales with moral messages, for they cannot be explained or verified “objectively” by “science”. We cannot approach God’s Word with such a perspective, because every pillar of Christianity would then have to be subjected to interpretation from a standpoint of unbelief. This being the case, much of the Bible itself would be subjected to unbelief also. Far from leading us to the truth, we would be led down the path to deception and damnation instead. Reason and logic are not enough to bridge the communication gap between God and man. It is therefore only through faith that we can understand spiritual things.

Sadly, even self-professing Christians deny a literal 6 twenty-four-hour-day creation of the world because they have placed so-called expert scientific opinion above the Word of God. They chose to have faith in scientists and not in the clear teachings of God. This is just one of many tragic outcomes of “faithless hermeneutics” which would ultimately lead to the outright denial of Christ as the sole mediator between God and man. Often times, it is those who are “highly educated” that are especially prone to this. Let us guard ourselves against such a subtle yet deadly attitude of unbelief, and take God’s Word as it is, never questioning, never doubting.

Thought: To the faithless, seeing is believing. To the faithful, believing is seeing.

Prayer: O Lord, help us that we may all walk by faith and not by sight.

IS FEAR OF GOD REQUIRED TO INTERPRET?

To fear God is to have a wholesome reverence for Him. The Bible tells us that only with such an attitude can we begin to attain knowledge and wisdom (Proverbs 1:7 and Psalm 111:10). Indeed, this will lead to a good understanding of His Word. Without such reverence, one would tend to handle God's Word casually and interpret it loosely and liberally.

Without fear or reverence, an interpreter would not take God's Word seriously and would not approach it with an attitude of respect and awe. This would result in a tendency for him to inject his own thoughts and ideas into his interpretation rather than to expound its meaning in the purest and most unadulterated way. If certain parts of the Bible do not suit or please him, he may simply disregard it or read into it an entirely different meaning.

From Proverbs 1:7 and Psalm 111:10 we learn that true knowledge and wisdom come from having such a fear and reverence. We need to approach God's Word with the utmost fear and trembling, not to treat it lightly or frivolously, but being acutely aware that these are the very words of God Almighty. Good technique or correct application of hermeneutics alone would not be enough, for without this right fear, we would not be approaching the study of God's Word with the right awareness of who its Author is, and how absolutely pure and true His words must be.

It is not difficult to understand how we have this tendency to perceive something less credibly when it is told by someone whom we do not take seriously. It is just like a convicted drug trafficker waiting on death row being told by one of his fellow inmates that he has been spared the gallows because he has been granted a Presidential Pardon. He has little reason to believe that it is true, considering the source of the news. If, however, he receives a letter with the Presidential stamp and seal saying exactly the same thing he would be elated as he would be absolutely convinced of its truth simply because it came straight from the President himself. How much more, then, are we to take God seriously and treat His Word with fear?

Thought: God's Word, unlike man's words, has the power to save souls and transform lives.

Prayer: Teach me, O Lord, to always hold Your Word in highest regard and to never deny its truth at any cost.

MUST WE HAVE THE HOLY SPIRIT TO INTERPRET?

1 Corinthians 2:12 teaches us that born-again believers receive the Spirit of God and not the spirit of the world, that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God. These things are the Gospel of Jesus Christ and other spiritual truths as proclaimed by God's Word. It is the Holy Spirit which inspired holy men used by God to record Scripture. It is the Holy Spirit that quickens (revive, to make alive) the spiritually dead souls of those not born-again. And it is the Holy Spirit within us that teaches us spiritual things (v13) – even a new-born believer would be able to grasp spiritual truths, whereas even the most intelligent genius, without the quickening of the Spirit, would never be able to understand a single spiritual truth.

We can understand how it is impossible to communicate with a dead person. We can speak to the person after he has breathed his last breath and not get any response at all. He is dead to the world. Likewise, it is impossible for someone who is spiritually unregenerate to perceive spiritual things (v14). He is dead and completely unresponsive to such things, just as someone who has just died a physical death cannot respond to stimulus of any kind. How then can we expect the unregenerate to be able to interpret God's Word, which is of a spiritual nature, when they cannot even perceive spiritual truth in the first place?

In Matthew 5, Jesus teaches us not only to refrain from retaliation against those who abuse us but to even pray for them. Unbelievers would not be able to understand or accept this as their instinct would be to strike back. However, genuine believers who bear the fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22) would exhibit longsuffering, gentleness, meekness and temperance in such situations. Only a supernatural transformation within us empowered by the Holy Spirit could enable us to conduct ourselves in this manner. Moreover, interpreters of God's Word are not just Bible students, teachers or pastors who must preach to others. Anyone, even a lay-person, interprets the Bible every time he reads it. This means that we all need the Holy Spirit's enablement to interpret God's Word and to read it with understanding.

Thought: God gave us His inspired Word through the Holy Spirit. We therefore receive it through the Holy Spirit also.

Prayer: O Lord we thank Thee for the Holy Spirit who points us to the cross of Christ, revealing it to us in Scripture.

HOW DOES THE HOLY SPIRIT HELP US TO INTERPRET?

The answer to the title of today's reading is described by 2 words, 'supernatural' and 'illumination'. Yes, through the inner workings of the Holy Spirit, we who were once blind now have been given spiritual eyes that see. This affects us in every way; our value system, outlook on life, daily conduct, way of thinking and of course, the way we approach and handle the Word of God.

How exactly does the Holy Spirit "*guide [us] into all truth*"? It is not something magical or mystical, though it is indeed supernatural. Whenever a truly born-again believer approaches the Word of God, with a prayerful and humble attitude, the Holy Spirit would simply grant understanding – not just an intellectual knowledge, but a spiritual appreciation of and assent to the Word. The words of Scripture would come to life, even as the believer recalls his past experiences and also other passages of Scripture that the Holy Spirit would bring to remembrance. As he continues to meditate on every word of Scripture, he would deepen in his understanding of God and His will and His way, and his life would go through a continual process of sanctification. As John 16:13 goes on to say, "*whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak*" – the words that the Spirit speaks in our hearts are the very words of God.

The Gospel is the most fundamental truth as proclaimed by God's Word, and yet, it is not the mere intellectual knowledge of the Gospel but genuine faith and belief in it that saves. If even our faith is given to us by God through the Holy Spirit which enables us to accept this basic truth, then it reasonably follows that it is through the Holy Spirit operating within us in the manner described above that helps us to discern all other spiritual truths. This is why we should always pray for the Holy Spirit to help us understand before and after reading God's Word.

Thought: Illumination isn't just having a correct understanding of God's Word but must also result in an inner transformation of the interpreter.

Prayer: Teach me, O Lord, to not just agree with Thy Word but also to be transformed anew by it.

MUST WE BE A “MEAT” CHRISTIAN TO INTERPRET?

The writer of Hebrews was frustrated with the people that he was writing to, for they lack the maturity to understand some of the things that he wanted to teach them. He described them as spiritual babies who still needed milk, and not mature believers who can consume meat. We realise that God desires all His children to mature in the faith. They must all learn to discern and proclaim the truth, reject and warn others about falsehood and glorify God. As every loving parent would desire and expect their little ones to grow physically and become independent and productive adults, likewise this is what God desires of us.

When a Christian is first born again, he would be *“unskillful in the word of righteousness”*. Perhaps there might be some passages of Scripture which he finds difficult to understand; as our text tells us, this is natural *“for he is a babe”*. But as he grows, he would slowly learn to *“discern both good and evil”*. How? Through regular reading of and meditation on God’s Word, which gradually honed his ability to interpret the Bible, even the more difficult passages.

Note, however, that this process does not come automatically for God the Holy Spirit will not do for us what we can reasonably do for ourselves, which is to consistently study and live out God’s Word. This is why we are told that those who, by reason of use, have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil are also those who are mature enough to handle the strong meat, rather than milk, of God’s Word (Hebrews 5:14).

God’s Word is so amazing that it is simple enough even for young children to understand and accept the most fundamental truth - salvation through Jesus. Yet, it is deep enough that we may need all of eternity to discover all of its wonderful truths. Certainly, we need not be *“meat”* Christians to know the Gospel but we do need to be *“meat”* Christians to have a deeper understanding of His Word which will make us steadfast and discerning. Only then can we be of greater use to God, proclaiming His Word to those who are still outside His kingdom and to help other believers grow in the faith.

Thought: The only way to become more of a *“meat”* Christian is to start feasting on the *“meat”* of God’s Word!

Prayer: Loving heavenly Father, thank Thee for Thy Word which is not just milk and meat but also bread indeed for my hungry soul.

IS BIBLICAL SEPARATION REQUIRED ALSO?

A practitioner of martial arts knows that the entire posturing of one's body has to be correct in order to be an effective exponent of this discipline. For example, the stance is important as it gives the person balance and stability. The forward knee must always be bent to prevent the risk of dislocation from an unexpected strike by the enemy. Fisted hands are positioned strategically to shield the face and upper abdomen while allowing the option of executing a swift counterpunch. Every part of the practitioner's body is in harmony so that he can be agile and lethal.

Likewise, interpreting God's Word involves wielding a spiritual weapon. Practitioners of the Sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God must have their entire spiritual positioning correct. This is where biblical separation comes in, otherwise we would be spiritually off-balanced. For example, we would sound hollow if we tried explaining to an unbeliever who asks if the Gospel is true, while denying that the Bible is inerrant and perfectly preserved. He would undoubtedly think that we have interpreted God's Word wrongly (which is indeed the case here) as he cannot reasonably be sure that the Gospel is not one of the “few minor errors” in the Bible. Furthermore, if we do not separate ourselves from false teachings and false teachers (like Hymenaeus and Philetus in today's passage), we will become influenced by them. 2 Timothy 2:21 instructs us to purge ourselves from these so that we will become vessels unto honor, fit for the Master's use.

Have we at some time had conversations with other Christians who have wrong beliefs and yet we have not been courageous or loving enough to correct them? Even worse, have we even, for the sake of maintaining good relations, agreed with them or participated in prayer and worship with them just to be “diplomatic”? God's Word makes no allowance for this. Indeed, the Word (Jesus) Himself said that He will deny us on the last day if we deny Him, for He gave us the truth and expects us to uphold it even if it means severing ties with others (Matthew 10:33-34).

Thought: It is very inconsistent to claim to know God's Word but yet not practise Biblical Separation.

Prayer: Strengthen me, O Lord, that I may proclaim Your truths fearlessly and without compromise to an unbelieving world.

HOW DOES SCRIPTURE INTERPRET SCRIPTURE?

Because of its self-authenticating nature, we can rely on the Bible to prove itself to be true. That is why the Bible alone is our supreme authority and guide in all matters of faith. Self-authentication simply means that something proclaims itself to be true. If we have a document that needs to be authenticated, we would need to bring it to a higher authority to have it certified as genuine. Since there is no higher authority than the Word of God, it therefore reasonably follows that only the Word itself can prove itself to be true. We see this principle at work in John 8:18 where Jesus bears witness of Himself because He is perfectly unbiased, absolutely truthful and is the supreme divine Authority.

This being the case, we can therefore understand that this unique quality of the Holy Scriptures means that we can refer to one part of it, perhaps a passage that is simpler to understand, and use it to interpret another more difficult passage. Indeed, the Old Testament is in the New Testament revealed, and the New Testament is in the Old Testament concealed. Passages from the Old Testament and New Testament are often used to verify and interpret each other. Since the Holy Spirit is not only the author of the Bible but also the one who illuminates sinful man, He interprets His own Word. Hence, Scripture interprets Scripture.

We may make the mistake of relying heavily on extra-Biblical resources such as devotionals (including this one!), commentaries etc. in our daily devotion or in studying the Bible. Of course, these can be very useful tools in helping us to understand certain passages, and we should certainly make use of these wonderful resources. However, we must not forget in the inherent value of the Word of God itself. As diligent students of God's Word, we must always go back to the Word itself as the final, sole supreme authority of our faith.

Thought: Only a wise God with no beginning and no end can be the source of a self-authenticating and self-interpreting book.

Prayer: Give me the faith, O Lord, to remain steadfast, always holding Your Word in highest regard.

HOW DO WE INTERPRET ISAIAH 7:14?

From Isaiah 7:14 and Matthew 1:22-23 we see once again how the New Testament is concealed in the Old Testament and how the Old Testament is revealed in the New Testament. It is clear from the simple reading of the two verses that the prophecy of a virgin birth in Isaiah 7:14 was perfectly and entirely fulfilled by Jesus Christ in Matthew 1:22-23. As we understand both verses literally and with faith, we would realise some wonderful truths about the Bible.

Firstly, that the Bible has a perfect track record when it comes to foretelling future events. Isaiah 7:14 (written between 701 and 681 B.C.) foretold the virgin birth of Christ some 700 years before it actually happened.

Secondly, the Bible verifies its other verses to be true simply because there is no contradiction with itself anywhere within its pages. What is left for the interpreter to do is to use those better understood verses to interpret those that are less clear.

Thirdly, the Bible can be interpreted literally. Though many details were not given in Isaiah 7:14 regarding the birth of Christ, these details were later revealed to us in the New Testament in passages such as Matthew 1:18-25. We can be convinced from the New Testament account that Mary was indeed a virgin, conceived of the Holy Spirit and gave birth to Jesus even before she and Joseph had consummated their marriage because the New Testament plainly said so. This proves Isaiah 7:14 to be absolutely correct and hence fulfils it to the letter.

“Wooden literalism” is another form of literal interpretation which is incorrect. This form of interpretation is rigid and mechanical, not taking into account things such as allegories, metaphors, parables and similes. Application of this form of interpretation would result in a bizarre and meaningless account of the superpowers of the world in sequential order in Daniel 7 and the end-time events described in Revelation 17. Biblical literalism, however, would give these prophetic accounts a more logical interpretation.

Thought: It is the Holy Spirit who will help me hear and not just listen; see and not just look.

Prayer: Lord, I pray that Thou will give me the wisdom to know not just Thy written Word but also Thy living Word.

HOW IMPORTANT IS CONTEXT?

Matthew 18:20 is one of the most misquoted verses from the Bible. This verse, read in isolation, seems to say that Jesus is always in the midst of Christians whenever they gather or pray together. However, looking at verses 15-19, we realise that this verse is actually referring to church discipline. Here, two or three people gathering in Christ's name means that church discipline and the affairs of the church cannot be undertaken by any person if it is not done under the authority of the local church under which the body of believers who belong to that particular church operates. Of course these all are subsumed under Jesus, the head of the Church. Christ will not approve or honour anything done outside of this authority.

Matthew 18:18 is also another verse which has been misquoted by many a churches to justify their practice of “demon-binding” or “Satan-binding”. One may have seen or experienced scenes of pastors intensely engaged in a ‘wrestling match’ against Satan and his minions in order to bind them. However, it is the pastor and the congregation that end up getting bound by this spiritual delusion instead while the devil remains free, delighted with their folly. What Jesus really meant by this verse is simply that the actions of those to whom He has given authority to act on His behalf shall be confirmed to be in accordance to His will in heaven one day. Thus when two or three are gathered in the name of Christ to administer church discipline, if all things are done according to His will, in His name, Jesus Christ would be there in their midst to validate and affirm their actions.

Here we see how quoting verses out of context can result in inappropriate application which may not only cause confusion but may even shipwreck the faith of sincere believers. After all, looking again at the example of Matthew 18:18 above, how can we believe God's Word is all-powerful if Satan and his demons keep breaking free to do mischief in this world in spite of getting repeatedly “bound” in Jesus' name? Reading the preceding and following verses helps us to see passages in the right context. Indeed, we can expand this and apply it to reading preceding and following chapters to put an entire chapter in the right context. Which other verses can you think of which are often wrongly or incompletely quoted?

Thought: A text has no meaning outside of its context.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, may You give me the necessary discipline never to handle Your Word loosely.

CAN SCRIPTURE CONTRADICT SCRIPTURE?

There was once a craftsman during the Era of the Warring States in China who sold spears and shields. To promote the sale of his wares, he proclaimed that his shield could withstand the blow of any weapon, and that his spear could penetrate anything. A person in the crowd he was hawking to then asked him what would happen if he were to use his spear against his shield, to which he was dumbfounded. This is how the Chinese idiom of the spear and shield came to be used to describe self-contradiction.

A contradiction is an error. Since the Bible comes from God who is perfect, it cannot contradict itself since that would mean that it has errors. When there are two contradictory statements, at least one of the statements must be untrue and is therefore a lie. 1 John 2:21 says that no lie is of the truth, meaning that the truth cannot contradict itself and those who teach anything contrary to this are false teachers. Since all of God’s Word is perfect and true, it therefore follows that it cannot have contradictions. Furthermore, even though the Bible was written by 40 or so human authors over 1500 years, they were all inspired by the same Holy Spirit who is God Himself. God cannot lie (Titus 1:2) any more than He can contradict Himself.

Many who attack the Bible and say that it has contradictions have never bothered to read and study the Bible for themselves. A Bible-answers website puts it this way: “a difference is not a contradiction. It is only an error if there is absolutely no conceivable way the verses or passages can be reconciled. Even if an answer is not available right now, that does not mean an answer does not exist. Many have found a supposed error in the Bible in relation to history or geography only to find out that the Bible is correct once further archaeological evidence is discovered.” Let us not be hasty in concluding that the Bible has contradictions when we encounter difficult passages. Know that God cannot be the contradictory spear and shield craftsman that the rest of us are from time to time. Rather, He is the infinitely wise and infallible Ancient of Days whose Word can be completely trusted for it is perfect as He is perfect. If we seem to see contradictions in the Bible, they are only apparent differences, and it is our fallible understanding that is lacking, not God’s infallible words.

Thought: The Bible would contradict itself only if it had errors, but we know that this is not so for we have a perfect Bible.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, sanctify us through Thy truth, for Thy Word is truth.

HOW IMPORTANT IS RIGHT DOCTRINE?

Right doctrine is sound doctrine. It is important to emphasize of sound doctrine in the life of a Christian. Right thinking about all spiritual matters is vital if we want to have right living. Just as we cannot make a silk purse out of a sow’s ears, how can we have a Christ-like character if all we have are unsound and erroneous teachings?

The word ‘doctrine’ simply means Bible teachings taught and held. It is the sacred task of all Christians to be certain that these teachings correspond exactly to Bible truth. What we understand and believe needs to constitute sound doctrine, for there are false doctrines and doctrines of the devil out there. To hold on to the doctrine of Christ is to hold on the true real knowledge of God. To do otherwise would be sin and transgression, for in 2 John 1:9 we are warned that without the right doctrine, we cannot come to God, but if we have right and sound doctrine, then we would know God the Father and the Son.

Each generation of Christians must guard the truths of the Bible. While truth itself is eternal and unchanging, the minds of men are easily swayed and influenced by godless teachings. As the apostles not only taught truth but contended for its purity against any who would corrupt it, each succeeding generation of faithful men must diligently study to rightly divide God’s Word and most of all be courageous and vigilant to guard the precious truths of God.

Application – Dear teens, the first step you must take is to be serious about your knowledge of the Bible. Seek to increase in your depth and understanding of the Bible. Here are some ways:

- a) After paying close attention to what is taught in your Teens class, follow-up by reading on your own to find out more about the subject.
- b) Attend a Bible Study group or initiate one with the help of your parents, teachers and friends.
- c) Read as many good Christian books as possible, perhaps setting a target of one per month.

Thought: Right creeds lead to right deeds.

Prayer: Lord, give me grace and strength to pursue the knowledge of God and to grow spiritually day by day as I feed upon Your holy and eternal Word.

HOW IMPORTANT IS HUMILITY?

The late Rev. Timothy Tow, founder of the B.P. Movement in Singapore and the Far Eastern Bible College, often related this quote by John Calvin to his theology students. It is said that when asked about what requirements one must have in studying theology, John Calvin’s reply was, “Humility, humility and humility.” None of us can say that we are humble enough, and so we must constantly seek the Lord for humility and more humility.

In the study of God’s Word, humility is most needed. First we need humility to examine ourselves and honestly confess our many sins and evil conduct before the Lord. Sins are filthy, loathsome and detestable in God’s sight and we should have abhorrence to it. Once we have such an attitude and seek to cleanse ourselves of a mind full of sensuality and wickedness, we are able to receive truth with greater force. As James 1:21 clearly tells us, we must first lay apart all filthiness and sin first, before we can begin to receive God’s Word. Purity of heart and mind is the best preparation always for seeing and receiving truth. Without humility, a proud person would always approach God’s Word with a “not me!” attitude, deliberately ignoring all calls to repentance and refusing to have his sins pointed out in the flawless mirror of Scripture.

A humble spirit thus receives the Word of God with meekness. Meekness, gentleness, docility, are vitally required in receiving the instructions of God’s Word. When we approach the Bible with such a manner, then the Word of God will be firmly engrafted or implanted in us, leading to fruits of righteousness, to the glory of God.

Dear teens, are you proud of your human intellect and wisdom, causing you to question what God says in His Word? It is time to say to yourself that if God says it, I will believe it. Don’t doubt anymore. As you prayerfully meditate on what God says in His Word more and more, you will soon find that you cannot deny the supreme truth it holds.

Thought: Humility is true greatness.

Prayer: Lord, teach me that pride goes before a fall and before honour is humility.

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF HUMAN REASONING?

Whatever God teaches in His Word does not bypass our minds. Instead, we bring our minds to bear on the truths taught in God’s Word and we find that it harmonises with human reasoning.

God has given us a sound mind to use as we apply ourselves intellectually to what we read and understand around us. In Paul’s exhortation to Timothy, his spiritual son, he desires that Timothy would cultivate such a well-balanced and sober mind. Paul regarded it as necessary to the performance of the duties of his office as the pastor and minister of God’s Word. It is just as needful for us as believers, now, as it was then.

God does not want us to be ruled by our emotions and feelings but to be grounded in the objective truth of God’s Word. We are to have a clear understanding and sound judgment so as to be soberly influenced to think, speak and act aright in all things. Together with the power and love that God has given us, we are thus enabled to hear, believe, hope and endure all things. John Calvin, the great theologian, states that the human reasoning faculty given to man, while not the master of faith, is an indispensable servant having an essential role to play in the task of faith seeking knowledge.

Dear Teen, we thank God for the reasoning faculty that He has given us. This makes us people of sober minds, not given to emotionalism but able to see things in its proper place and perspective. Therefore when we study the Word of God, it must be with clear minds, free from distractions and pre-conceived notions. We must also realise that it is an activity that requires active thinking and reasoning on our part, and therefore effort must be put into it. But at the same time we must remember that it is the Holy Spirit that guides us in seeking God and it is Scripture that is the guide and authority, not our human understanding. Our reasoning is important, but it must always submit to the authority of God in His Word.

Thought: It is rational to believe in the incomprehensibility and omnipotence of God.

Prayer: Our Father in heaven, thank You for creating reason, not that I may use it to produce truth independently, but that I may use it to understand the revealed truth of God.

HOW MUST WE VIEW GOD'S WORD?

2 Timothy 3:16 is a clear proof text that speaks of the divine inspiration of all Scripture – both the Old Testament and the New Testament. The phrase *"given by inspiration of God"* literally has the meaning of God breathing out the very words of Scripture, such that what were written were the words of God Himself. The idea is that Scripture is the production of God. In this way, the sacred writers were kept from error. Thus we say that the Bible is inerrant and infallible – without error and incapable of any error. It is also perfect as God is perfect. It is everlasting as God is everlasting. It is fully preserved for *"Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away"* (Matthew 24:35).

The Bible is also profitable for doctrine as well as for reproof and correction. All of it is sound doctrine worthy of our learning. In the process, it reproves us of our sins and corrects us when we are wrong. The Word of God is the most powerful and the most effective means of rescuing those who are ungodly and in the depths of sin. No reformation can be permanent which is not based on the principles of the Word of God.

There is instruction in righteousness throughout the Bible. Man needs to be taught what is right, what is required of him, in order that he may lead a holy life. God's Word will furnish him with the rules of holy living and thus guide him successfully in his life on earth. Therefore we should always regard the Scripture as our supreme authority in our life.

Dear Teen, there is no book like the Bible. It is a divine book from heaven and God Himself to teach us the heavenly way. First and foremost, it leads us to eternal life for it tells us that unless we believe and confess our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, repenting of our sins, we will perish (John 3:14-18). Being thus born again to walk in the Spirit, we are nourished by this very Word to grow in grace and knowledge of God. Thus we must have the utmost reverence and respect for the Word of God. We must approach it with holy awe, never doubting it nor scorning it, but fully believing that these are the very inspired words of God speaking to us.

Thought: Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law.

Prayer: Lord, may I treasure Your Word, reading, loving, obeying and living it.

WHAT ABOUT THOSE THAT DOUBT GOD’S WORD?

The first ever instance of men doubting God was in the beautiful Garden of Eden. The Tempter was the Devil, in the shape and likeness of a serpent, more cunning and crafty than any other creature. Satan’s plan was to draw our first parents to sin, and so to separate them from the perfect communion with God. Thus the devil was from the beginning a great mischief-maker.

He tempted Eve when he talked to her when she was alone. When he said, *“Yea, hath God said?”*, he questioned God’s clear command that she should not eat of the fruit, and placed the seed of doubt in Eve’s mind. His question insinuated that God is not that good and kind, that surely there must be some mistake. Satan tried to create a doubt in her mind and appeared as an angel of light (2 Corinthians 11:14), offering to lead her to the “true” interpretation.

Satan tempted Eve so that through her he might tempt Adam. It is his strategy to send temptations through people whom we do not suspect, and by those that have the most influence over us. Beware of his wiles. It is our wisdom to keep up a firm belief of God’s command, and a high respect for it. What God says, we will abide by it. Satan teaches men first to doubt, and then to deny. Our strength and our wisdom are always to think well of God as the best, trusting and obeying Him at all times.

Dear Teen, it is hard to be humble when you see the world taking advantage of the weak and the meek. But you need to take God at His Word. He says that before honour is humility and thus asking for His protection, wisdom and mercy, we react with meekness to the rough and tough talk around us. We obey God by reacting humbly to the taunts and mockings of men, even friends, with faith that God will honour us for obedience to His Word. Do not doubt. Do not deny. A Christian who walks arrogantly is no witness for the Lord.

Thought: “Humble yourselves therefore, under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time” (1 Peter 5:6).

Prayer: Gracious loving heavenly Father, ever teach me to be humble for Thou lovest the meek and humble.

DO WE NEED TO 'CORRECT' GOD'S WORD?

Any attempt to "correct" God's Word is to corrupt God's Word. It is perfect and there is absolutely no need to add or subtract or change God's Word. There is a warning and solemn injunction that no one is to do that at the close of the last book of the Bible. The purpose is to guard Scripture from being corrupted by sinful men.

Those who add to God's Word think that the Bible is incomplete, and that they can somehow 'improve on it'. The modern corrupters are those who think they have new truth from God that they want to communicate to the people. Others claim to receive visions and dreams from God, and see them as additional revelation from God, even using them to supersede the Word of God in their lives. Such persons are actually the enemies of Christ and the curse of God is upon them.

Then there are those who subtract from God's Word, even taking out twelve verses of Mark 16, as was done by the NIV translators when they removed Mark 16:9-20, together with many other verses from different parts of the Bible. These evil men are rejecting the Word of God when they discard and cast doubts on any part of God's Word. Every jot and tittle is precious. They have tampered with God's pure and perfect Word and God says that He will remove their part out of the book of life. Their names were never written in the first place. They were never saved and they will now not be saved.

Dearest teen, there will be times when the Word of God is difficult to understand. There will also be some passages that are obscure so that you indulge in your own conjectures. Our response must never be to think that the Word of God is in error. Rather we must have the humility to accept that there are certain things that our limited knowledge and maturity cannot comprehend. Little by little as you grow in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord, more and more things will be clearer to you. Above all, understand that a finite mind like ours can never fathom the infinite mind of God and it is best always to trust and obey. No jot or tittle of Christ's Word shall fall to the ground. All shall have its fulfillment in God's time.

Thought: *"...the truth of the Lord endureth for ever. Praise ye the Lord."*
(Psalm 117: 2)

Prayer: Gracious and loving heavenly Father, may I ever magnify Thy Word by loving Your Word, studying and obeying it all the days of my life.

WHY DO PEOPLE IGNORE SOUND DOCTRINE?

We know that sound doctrine is central to one’s right interpretation of God’s Word. It is essential that we have the right view of God and His Word, in order to have the right approach to understand it. Yet the Bible warns of some would *“not endure sound doctrine”*. This is something we see all around us in these last days. People only want to listen to teachings that pander *“after their own lusts”*, that are more conformable to their wishes and feelings, such as the lust for the health and wealth gospel so popular nowadays. They ignore sound doctrine that will contribute to the health of their soul and salvation and seek after the material comforts and sensual pleasures of this world. It is carnal, after the flesh and not after the spirit (Romans 8:4-9). Others ignore doctrine because they want to elevate unity. However, such ‘unity’ is merely superficial, for true unity must always be unity in truth, truth being of supreme importance.

There will always be false teachers who seek to lead people astray. We need to be wise concerning the evils of the world. As sins abound, so will the wickedness of men. However, instead of having wisdom, these foolish people have *“itching ears”* and are ready to run after all kinds of charismatic and popular teachers/preachers of the day that suit their fancy and make them *“feel good”*. Our desire to hear the truth must not lead us to be fickle and unsettled, constantly running after many teachers. Far more can be achieved if we learn under the patient and intelligent labour of a single faithful teacher of God’s Word.

People turn our ears from the solid truth of God’s Word because the truth points to their sins, demands conformity to a crucified Christ and they are unable to accept it. Instead of repenting, they reject the truth. They turn to believing fables which are old wives’ tales, figments of their imagination and utterly vain.

Dear teen, be not like these fickle and frivolous people. Hold fast to that which is good. Be watchful and vigilant. The enemies we face are *“all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life”* (1 John 2:16). Also, keep close to fellow believers to defend yourselves against the attacks of Satan. Encourage one another as well as pray for one another.

Thought: *“Continue thou in the things which thou have learned.”*
(2 Timothy 3:14a)

Prayer: Lord, grant that I will keep the faith that was once delivered unto the saints.

DO SOME PEOPLE DELIBERATELY MISINTERPRET?

God does not want us to be so childish and naïve as to think that everybody is kind and good. We must realise that there are evil people who seek to entrap and deceive their ‘victims.’ They are full of ‘cunning craftiness’. In school, you are aware that there are thieves, cheats and even gangsters. Outside school, there are kidnappers, swindlers and loan sharks. In the realm of the spiritual, there are also men who have all sorts of unbelief, occult practices and even witchcraft. Even within the Church, the Bible gives numerous warnings of wolves in sheep’s clothing who would come in to spoil the flock. The Apostle Paul warns of such as those who teach false doctrine *“by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive”* (Ephesians 4:14). Their methods are deliberately deceitful, seeking only to profit self and have no concern for the truth of God’s Word. They would appear like Christians, act like Christians, even becoming leaders, teachers and pastors in churches. Their purpose is not to serve or glorify God, but to serve themselves. As such they would deliberately use the Word of God to their own advantage, with false teachings and doctrines to the end that they may deceive.

To this the Apostle Paul exhorts us to be mature Christians to hold firmly the sound doctrine that we have learned. Even if you are a young Christian, settle it in your mind to acquire a deep knowledge of God’s Word and be well grounded in the doctrines of our faith. This is our best protection against the people who deliberately teach contrary to the Bible. If we are not steadfast in our belief, we are like a ship sailing on the restless ocean, tossed about with every changing wind. We can also be easily influenced by the cunning skill and ‘trickery’ of people. Therefore, be on your guard. Our values and beliefs are formed by the Word of God and not by the trickery of false teachers.

Dear teen, ungodly men have been misinterpreting the Bible since the days of the early church. The Apostle Paul gives an example in his warning about two corrupt teachers called Hymenaeus and Philetus who twisted the meaning of the Bible concerning resurrection (2 Timothy 2:17-18). Thus they destroy the truth of God that gives hope to believers. They have also destroyed the faith of some. May we never become one of their victims.

Thought: “Study to show thyself approved unto God” (2 Timothy 2: 15).

Prayer: Lord, may I know my Bible well enough to discern truth from error.

HOW ABOUT THOSE DIFFICULT PASSAGES?

In this passage, Peter honestly writes that in the epistles of Paul, there are some things that are hard or difficult to understand. In his writings, he addresses many deep spiritual truths that can be challenging to comprehend, even for mature believers. These things are sometimes difficult to fully understand because of several reasons. The mind could perhaps be overwhelmed by the majesty and greatness of the thoughts or themes presented. Or it could be that we are unlearned (ignorant) and shaky in our understanding of certain truths of God. Sometimes it is because the mind is so prejudiced that we are unwilling to receive certain teachings. Furthermore, we know the heart is deceitful and desperately wicked, and we are blinded to the simple truths of God's Word.

Because of all that, God has given spiritually mature leaders to the church, for they are needed to teach, preach and expound God's Word to God's people. They can make difficult things plain and easy to understand. They have specialized training and the spiritual experience to know how to interpret Biblical passages in a systematic manner, so that the complex passages can be made clear. Just as Peter was humble enough to admit that certain of Paul's writings were difficult to grasp, we too need to acknowledge the fact that we need the help and guidance from pastors and teachers in the church to help us to understand and interpret parts of the Bible.

This is not to say that we become reliant on them, or that without them we are completely lost. We must remember that from the seminary professor with multiple theological degrees to the newest convert to Christianity, we as believers all have the same Holy Spirit in us that can illumine our hearts and guide us into all truth. We are told in 2 Timothy 3:15 that the sacred Scriptures can indeed make us wise unto salvation, if only we have an open and teachable heart. A believer will also certainly find much milk and meat in the Bible to help him grow in his faith.

As you read your Bible daily and diligently, remember to pray before you read God's Word, asking the Holy Spirit to illumine your mind and heart, to make His Word plain and clear to you. We need a humble heart and a submissive spirit so that the entrance of God's Word can cleanse and bless us.

Thought: We have the spirit of God that we might know the things that are given to us.

Prayer: Our Father in heaven, as I grow in the knowledge of God's Word, teach me to be grateful to the many teachers who have taught me too.

AREN'T SCHOLARS THE BEST INTERPRETERS?

First, we must understand that there are Bible-believing scholars and there are liberal scholars, and a whole spectrum in between them. On one end, fundamental, God fearing, Bible-believing scholars hold to the supreme authority of the Bible for all matters of faith and practice. Liberal, faithless scholars on the other hand, have a low view of God's Word, looking for mistakes in it and critiquing it. They belong to the category of people who are *'ever learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth'*. They might have a form of godliness but they are actually not saved for they have not saving faith in God.

Therefore do not look to these liberal scholars to teach you. They may have spent years in seminaries, learnt and even taught the Biblical languages, but they do not have the truth. They are blind and ignorant guides who are only enemies of God. They begin with a premise of unbelief, and seek only their own profit and glory. Instead of learning more about God and exalting His name, they are intent on finding fault with the Bible, and ridiculing it. Only the scholars who are born again and have complete faith in the Bible are capable of interpreting the Word of God faithfully.

But a truly born-again believer can also study the Bible with great profit. The central message of salvation and the wondrous works of God are so plainly stated that any child of God can understand it. *“The entrance of thy words giveth light; it giveth understanding to the simple”* (Psalm 119:130). The technicalities of scholarship may be out of his reach, but nonetheless he can, with God's blessings, grasp all the main truths of God's message.

Dear teen, you can equip yourself to know the Bible better. Besides reading and studying the Bible in your class and at home, you can also buy books on Bible customs to read on the background of many parables and events in the Bible. There are also maps that you should refer to and even study especially when you are studying the many battles of Joshua or the missionary journeys of Paul. There is also the Bible software that you can use to check on Bible commentaries, verses and do cross-references. Also, there are sermons online that you can hear to great benefit. Money spent on these useful Bible resources is money well spent.

Thought: Invest in things of eternal value.

Prayer: Father in heaven, may I spare no effort to devote myself to a lifetime of Bible study, for Your Word is the delight of my heart.

WHAT IS THE RATIONALISTIC METHOD?

Over the next few days, we will be learning more about various methods of interpreting the Bible, and determine which the correct one is. We start first of all with the Rationalistic Method. This approach, which stresses human reasoning, blossomed during the post Reformation period. It continues to this day in many liberal seminaries and apostate churches. Germany is the home of many proponents of this method of interpretation. This is due to the many schools of Higher Criticism there which seek to undermine the authority of Scripture.

Those who use this method of interpretation literally divide the Bible into many tiny pieces to dissect and examine, categorizing many portions as what they claim to be "not God's Word" and then reassemble them back into what they claim to be the real Bible. This they do because they pick and choose those parts of the Bible which they believe is God's Word, using their own reasoning.

The basic presupposition of this method is that the Bible is like any other man-made book. There is no such thing as inspiration. All Scripture is subjected to human reason in order to determine the validity or historicity of its statements. Whatever portions that do not square with their human thinking and understanding are rejected. Thus miracles are explained away as false. For example, they cannot accept that Jesus can walk on the water, and so they reject it or sometimes explain it as there being rocks beneath the water which made Jesus 'appear' to walk on the water. The supernatural and miraculous are things that do not make sense to them, and therefore they rationalise them away. The human wisdom and limited knowledge of the sinful finite interpreter takes center stage.

So you see, dear teen, how important it is to rightly divide God's Word. This harmful method of interpretation exalts the sinful interpreter who sets himself up as the standard of truth and only sees value in Scripture as it fits and confirms his own opinions. This method denies the greatness of God, His omnipotence, His omnipresence and His omniscience. This method is to be totally rejected.

Thought: Is your Christian faith based on reason?

Prayer: Our Father in heaven, grant me to know that there are more wondrous things in heaven and earth than what my eye and ear can see and hear.

WHAT IS THE ALLEGORICAL METHOD?

This method originates through the union of Greek philosophy and religion. To varying degrees, this method attempts to see a deeper meaning behind the simple literal reading of each passage by way of allegories. It is not the natural evident meaning that gives the Bible its importance but the ‘mystical’ sense, which means its hidden or spiritual sense. These interpreters search for the hidden meaning beyond the external, literal meaning. They may sometimes have good intentions, but the method is wrong, and it results in the wrong interpretations of God’s Word.

For example, in the account of the Good Samaritan, the literal plain meaning is that we are to love our neighbour, showing kindness and compassion. This neighbour includes anybody that God brings our way, including people whom we may dislike or are at enmity with. However, those who use the allegorical method might explain this passage by saying that the wounded man stands for Adam, the thieves are the devil and his demons, and the innkeeper is the ruler of the church as the inn is the church. Jesus is then the good Samaritan who brings Adam into the church, and gives two coins, the Old and New Testament. This is sheer imagination, and not at all the intention of this parable.

The error of this school of interpretation is its foundational assumption that what God said in plain language is not really what God meant. Instead, it depends on the ingenuity and imagination of the interpreter and not the Word of God. This method makes the Bible say what the interpreter wants it to say. This forces the biblical text to have a meaning which it does not possess. The authority of the Bible is therefore also lost.

Indeed, when the plain sense makes good sense, seek no other sense. This is a good guideline for you when you read and study your Bible.

Thought: “When the plain sense makes good sense, seek no other sense.”

Prayer: O Father, illumine me and guide me when I read, study and meditate on Your sacred Scriptures. Help me to rightly divide Your Word.

WHAT IS THE MYSTICAL METHOD?

This method is very closely associated with the allegorical method. It involves both allegorical and mystical interpretations of the Old Testament. Thus it goes beyond the allegorical method and opens the door even wider to a great variety of interpretations. Using this method, a passage of Scripture with an obvious literal meaning is interpreted to have a number of so-called 'exalted' meanings. Because of the desire to reach beyond the letter into the spirit of the Word, this method is also called Spiritualization.

As an example, the natural sense of the commandment "*Thou shalt not kill*" is that we are forbidden to murder, have hatred and to take revenge. The spiritual or mystical sense is to interpret it as forbidding one to act the devil and trying to destroy a man's soul. Although it is true generally that we should not do so, this teaching is not found in this particular verse, and other verses should be sought to find that command.

The error of this method, by saying that there are any number of meanings to a Scripture text, implies that when God wrote Scripture, He meant more than what He actually said in His Word. The problem is that if God does not mean what He says then how do we know what is the truth? Mystics can say what they like with the Scripture text and no one will be able to speak with any authority as they discuss and debate every verse. Again, the authority of the Bible is undermined if we adopt this harmful method.

Dear teen, the method we choose to interpret the Bible changes the conclusions we reach. Thus choosing the correct method to interpret the Bible can mean the difference between salvation and damnation. The solution is to choose the correct method of interpretation. Do you know what it is?

Thought: Always handle the Word of God reverently, humbly and prayerfully.

Prayer: O Father in heaven, help me to be diligent and humble as I read and study my Bible, that I might rightly divide the Word of God.

WHAT IS THE HISTORICAL LITERAL METHOD?

This is the oldest method in existence. It is said to have originated with Ezra, the Father of Hermeneutics. The progress of its history is through the Palestinian Jews, Christ and the Apostles, the School of Antioch, and the Reformers, to the fundamental Conservatives of today.

This approach regards the Bible to have been written as history, that is, neither allegorical, nor composed of fables and traditions. However, this does not mean that everything is to be interpreted literally, without recognizing the fact that the Bible also made use of figures of speech, metaphors and idioms. It accepts every kind of figurative language as well as the spiritual meaning in a literal context. It also does not rule out the possibility of having multiple applications of a particular verse or passage. Whilst there can be only one right meaning and interpretation of any verse, we can draw multiple applications for our Christian life from it.

In today's reading we see that the prophets of old could not fully understand the exact order of events that would transpire at the coming of the Messiah. They could not discern the difference between the prophecies of a suffering savior and a victorious king. Yet the prophets faithfully reported and wrote what God would have them to write, and now their writings as recorded in the Bible benefit us. Only with hindsight and the complete canon of Scripture are we able to understand that Christ came the first time to save us, and then He will come again the second time to judge those outside His kingdom. Between these two comings, a period of more than 2,000 years has already passed, and only God knows how long more we will have to wait. Whilst it was hard for them to understand, it is clear to us when we interpret the prophecies literally, and not attempt to find any deeper allegorical or mystical meaning behind each verse.

Dear teen, the golden rule of Bible interpretation is always to seek the plain sense and then to seek no other sense. This is a good and safe rule to avoid error and wild speculations. We need to seek what God says and accurately understand it. Thank God for godly and faithful preachers/teachers of the Word who will exegete and expound Bible texts and passages to aid us in our understanding too.

Thought: There is one interpretation but many applications.

Prayer: Help me, Lord, to be a good student of Thy infallible, inerrant and fully preserved Word.

WHAT IS THE CORRECT METHOD?

The actual author of the 66 books of the Bible is God. More specifically, it is God the Holy Spirit who worked through the authors of Scripture to write the very words of God. The Holy Spirit is omniscient. He knows all things, and superintended the exact words of Scripture from Genesis to Revelation. This being the case, the best method of interpretation is one that seeks to find out what the divine author, God Himself, had in mind when He moved the holy men of old to write. The human interpreter should step aside in reverence and awe and let God be God. We are to try to find out only what God’s intended meaning is, and seek no other fanciful explanation.

The holy men of God were moved by the Holy Spirit of God when they wrote the books of the Bible. Though their distinct style and personality can be discerned from a study of their books, nevertheless, they wrote under the inspiration and guidance of the Holy Ghost such that sometimes they may not even have had full comprehension of what God wanted them to write. Yet in obedience to God’s command, they wrote.

These holy men of God, moved strongly by this powerful divine impulse to write what they did, wrote in the name and fear of God. This shows the authority of the Scriptures, that they are the very words of God, and not of men. As such they should be attended to, and received with all affection and reverence; and with a firm belief that the Spirit is the best interpreter of them, who first dictated them. The Bible alone stands far above any other literary works of men, and must be viewed as such. Nothing man has ever written or ever will write can match up to the perfection, glory and splendour of God’s Word.

Dear teen, may you endeavor to better understand the literal method of interpreting Scripture. Let God interpret what He has said. The words God inspired were given to communicate a certain meaning to those who read it. This means that if we find what the correct meaning of the word is, its context, normal and customary usage at the time it was used, we can know the correct interpretation. The interpretation is the meaning God wanted His words to convey.

Thought: Confusion arises because unskilled men, even unregenerate men, mishandle God’s Word.

Prayer: Father in heaven, may I apply proper biblical principles of interpretation and accurately understand Thy Word.

DO BIBLICAL GENRES AFFECT INTERPRETATION?

As we read through the Bible, we realise that it does not read like any storybook that we get from the bookshops. Neither is it like the textbooks that we use in school. It is unique (possibly confusing even), in that it is a collection of different sorts of writings, not always arranged in chronological or logical order. We have of course the narratives that are easier to understand, but there are also chapters and books of laws, of genealogies; there are also many books of poetry and prophecy, many of which are not so simple to interpret. Then there are epistles (letters) recorded, and mysterious visions of the future. The list goes on!

You may ask – if God wants to teach us the Christian doctrine so that we know His will, isn't it easier to give us a book of systematic theology, rather than this collection of books, which includes various "genres" like narratives, poetry, epistles etc?

But think again – won't it be very boring if all that we have is just systematic theology (like a textbook)? Don't get me wrong, I love systematic theology, and find it very exciting, but it's even more exciting to read the Bible itself – Genesis, the books of Kings, the Prophets, the Gospels, Epistles etc! These would be so enriching and wonderful if you read the Bible with understanding, with love and with the guidance of the Holy Spirit!

In going through each book of the Bible, we learn to appreciate the faith of Abraham ("He went out, not knowing whither he went"), the "rise and fall" of David, the labours of the apostle Paul, and most important, the life of our Lord Jesus – not only intellectually, but with the knowledge that goes deep into the heart!

God made us and He knows us the best! He knows that we learn best through different types of genres (narrative, poetry etc)! That is why, "God... at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets".

The question today is: "Do biblical genres affect interpretation"? The answer is of course, "Yes"! We will learn over the next few weeks the 'what' and 'how' and 'why' of this statement.

Thought: The Bible is "a pool in which a baby can paddle or an elephant can swim".

Prayer: Lord, teach me to love Thy Word more and more each day.

WHAT ARE NARRATIVES?

If you have attended Sunday School as a child, you may have learned the story of Esther! It is given to us as a narrative, which basically relates a historic account in a chronological manner. One author gives a technical definition of a narrative as “a way of ordering events and thoughts in a coherent sequence that makes them interesting to listen to”. But do remember that when we say that the Book of Esther is a story, it does not mean that it is fiction. It is certainly not a tale which somebody invented, but every last detail of the account is accurate and true as God’s Word is true!

If you take time to read through the story of Esther, I’m sure you’ll agree with this definition! When I was reading it, I could imagine the story being made into a film (which could be very exciting to watch!). I could imagine the scenes vividly in my mind – the lavish banquet, the selection of Esther as queen, the evil plot by Haman, the counter-plot by Esther and Mordecai, Haman hanging from the gallows, and finally the celebration of the Jews in the festival of Purim!

The textbooks would tell you that there are 6 elements to a narrative:

1. Setting, 2. Character, 3. Plot, 4. Conflict, 5. Climax, 6. Resolution

You can see that the story of Esther has all the narrative elements aplenty – a vivid setting, unforgettable characters, an exciting plot, breath-holding conflicts, a superb climax, and a wonderful resolution!

But, most important of all, God gives us the book of Esther not to keep us entertained, but to teach us valuable lessons, chiefly that of the sovereignty of God. Through this account, we witness how He kept His “*chosen people*” safe from genocide – and this fits in with the whole theme of the Bible from Creation to the election of Abraham, Jacob, David and finally to the “*Son of David*” – our Lord Jesus Christ! – the theme being how God preserved His people so that Jesus Christ can come as the Son of David to be our Saviour!

Thought: Learn to enjoy, appreciate and learn from each part of the Bible (not only your “favourite” portions!)

Prayer: Lord, forgive me for the many times I take Your Word lightly.

WHAT IS POETRY?

Some things are easier to know than to define – and this includes poetry! Read all the 6 verses of Psalm 1, and you can feel within your heart and soul, that “this is superb poetry”!

So, what is poetry? We can see it as a way of conveying a message concisely and beautifully and in a way that is easy to remember. Poetry in the Bible is mostly in the Old Testament and was originally written in Hebrew. They can be found primarily in the books of poetry - Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Songs of Solomon. But not just in these books, Hebrew poetry abounds within the narratives and prophecies as well; for example the songs of Moses and Miriam which we find in Exodus 15, as well as the book of Lamentations which is essentially a series of poems of mourning. In fact, one estimate has accounted approximately one third of the Old Testament to have been written in poetry.

The beauty of poetry lies in its brevity. Each succinct line is packed full of meaning. But at the same time, there are parts that are more difficult to understand and would require time and effort to interpret.

One distinctive that we must take note of when we study Hebrew poetry is the common use of parallelism. The lines of poetry are structured in such a way that one line often parallels the next. There are 4 main types of parallelism that we can identify. Firstly, they can be synonymous, like in Psalm 1:1 where the three traits of a blessed man are paralleled to each other, with similar meanings. At times, the parallels can be opposites, where the next line contrasts or is contrary to the previous, often highlighted with the conjunction ‘but’. This can be seen in the ideas contrasted between verses 1 and 2 of Psalm 1. Yet other parallels are when the subsequent line further elaborates the previous one, like how the thought of delight in the law in verse 2 is further explained by the fact that the blessed man meditates in it day and night. The final type of parallelism is one where it is comparative, whereby an illustration is used to explain a point. This is like how a picture of a tree is used to describe the blessed man.

Thought: God gives us poetry. Have you learned to appreciate the beauty and depth of poetry?

Prayer: I thank You, Lord, for giving us all things good and beautiful!

WHAT IS PROPHECY?

The English word “prophet” is taken directly from an ancient Greek verb which literally means “to speak for” or “on behalf of”. Thus the noun embraces the concept of speaking for someone, or a spokesman. The account of Moses at the burning bush is a good Biblical illustration – in Exodus 7:1, God spoke to a very reluctant Moses, saying, “See, I have made thee as a god to Pharaoh: and Aaron thy brother shall be thy prophet.” Aaron was to be Moses’ spokesman i.e. to speak for Moses.

In practice, the word “prophecy” can be used in two ways:

1. Prophecy means “foretelling” – to tell in advance of future events e.g. the many prophecies predicting our Lord’s first and second comings. A good example would be today’s text, which in one short passage foretells both comings - as a humble child, and as a glorious Judge and King.
2. Prophecy can also mean “forth-telling” – to teach and to instruct e.g. the vast majority of the messages of the Major and Minor Prophets come from direct commands of God through the mouths of the prophets. An excellent example is the opening of the Book of Isaiah: “Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth: for the LORD hath spoken, I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against me” (Isaiah 1:2). You can easily imagine the prophet Isaiah preaching powerfully at the porch of the temple, warning the people of Jerusalem about God’s wrath against their unfaithfulness.

Now – question time! Who is the greatest prophet of all? – Moses? Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel...?

Undoubtedly the right answer is: Our Lord Jesus Christ – He not only speaks for God and reveals the truth about God’s love and judgment, but He reveals the nature of God as nobody else can – because He is God Himself!

Our Lord Jesus came to Earth to do His Father’s will as “Prophet, Priest and King” – The greatest prophet, the greatest priest and the greatest king. So what should we do? – Listen to the prophet, bless the priest (be thankful to Him), and worship the King!

Thought: Do we still have prophets in the church today?

Prayer: Lord, teach me to be thy “prophet” – to know thy Word so well that I will be able to “forth-tell” Thy Word to others!

WHAT IS AN EPISTLE?

Nowadays, we can communicate with our friends easily – phone calls, emails, WhatsApp and even through Skype! But in New Testament days, it was much tougher, for writing and sending letters was much more laborious and expensive! So you can understand how important the epistles were, when so much time and expense was spent for them – for the sake of the believers. They only had the Old Testament for their Scriptures at that time (no Acts, Revelation, and of course no epistles except those that they received!). They desperately needed authoritative biblical teaching! So the Apostles wrote the epistles to them to address certain issues in the churches, to correct false teachings, rebuke sin, and encourage the believers. Indeed in studying them, we can learn so much about God’s will.

But there’s one problem – when we read these epistles, it’s just like overhearing a phone conversation – we can hear only one side of the conversation, but we don’t quite know the context of the conversation. So, if we want to understand the epistles, we have to learn the background, and that means some hard work! The book of Acts is a very useful companion when studying the epistles, for it provides the historical backdrop of much of what went on in the various churches which were the recipients of these letters.

A few years ago, our church had just completed a series on 2 Corinthians. I must confess that before I studied this book, I had great difficulty in understanding this epistle, and even had great reluctance in reading it. But after studying the book itself, with much assistance from the sermons and Bible commentaries, I started to appreciate the great apostle Paul, especially his great love for the Christians in Corinth – even though they had caused him much grief, he continued to love them and tried his best to teach them. Another good and perhaps simpler epistle to read could be Paul’s epistle to the Philippians, which is also called “the epistle of joy”. There are wonderful lessons and memory verses in this small epistle. Or what about James? To me, he is like an experienced battle-scarred pastor with many stories to tell – and a “straight-talker” to boot. See how he began his epistle: *“My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations”*. Makes you want to see what more he has to say right?

Thought: Is there any important significance in the different greetings that are included at the beginning of each epistle?

Prayer: The word of God is indeed a “pearl of great price” – pray that I will be willing to pay the price (in diligent study).

WHAT IS A PARABLE?

Our Lord loved to teach through parables! What is a parable? One definition is: "a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought." In the parables, Jesus uses common earthly things (seeds, sower, coins, sheep etc) to illustrate heavenly truths. Some of these parables are easy to interpret, but some others can be more obscure and harder to understand.

One good example of a parable is the passage that we have for today. It's probably the most well-known parable in the Bible – the Parable of the soils. It also comes with the interpretation from verse 14-20, whereby we know that Jesus was instructing His disciples on the different responses they will encounter when they go forth to preach the gospel. Of course the only good response is that the good ground, whereby they receive the word with faith, and bring forth fruit.

Nestled within the parable and the interpretation, are two interesting verses, Mark 4:11-12, where Jesus explains the reason why He would actually utilise parables as part of His teaching. For those who have ears to hear and a desire to know more, they would put in the effort to ask the Lord, and actively seek the truth. For them, Parables are a deep and meaningful way to know more about God's truth. It is a wonderful didactic tool, to use simple everyday occurrences to bring across deep divine principles. With this method, Jesus could reveal these hidden truths to them in a manner that is easily understood, and would leave a lasting impression. However, for those who have rejected Christ, the parable was a judgment to conceal the truth from them. These are those who are 'without' – outside the Kingdom of God. They have no interest in knowing Christ and the truth, and now Christ will judicially prevent them from understanding His teachings. Without Christ's interpretation, they would not be able to grasp the spiritual significance of what Christ is trying to teach, and would also not be able to find fault with His teachings.

For us as we read these parables, we must, like the disciples, seek the Lord for the wisdom to be able to understand these wonderful truths!

Thought: *"And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart"* (Jeremiah 29:13).

Prayer: Lord, grant me ears to hear, and the wisdom to understand.

ARE THERE GENRES WITHIN GENRES?

The book of Exodus is largely a narrative, but there are passages of poetry in it. In Exodus 14:30, we read: *“Thus the LORD saved Israel that day out of the hand of the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead upon the sea shore”*...then in response, *“Then sang Moses and the children of Israel this song unto the LORD”* (Exodus 15:1).

The passage today is also called *“The Song of Moses”*. This song was sung immediately after God saved the children of Israel, and the Egyptian army all drowned in the Red Sea. You can imagine the great joy of the Israelites – of course, they would break out into a song in praise to the Lord!

Doesn't this remind you of Psalm 126:1-2? *“When the LORD turned again the captivity of Zion, we were like them that dream. Then was our mouth filled with laughter, and our tongue with singing: then said they among the heathen, The LORD hath done great things for them.”*

Can you think of other poems inside a narrative book?

Read chapter 1 and 2 of the Gospel of Luke, where we find three hymns of praise!

1. Magnificat (Luke 1:46-56) – Mary praised God for His favour.
2. Benedictus (Luke 1:67-79) – Zacharias praised God for giving him a son, John the Baptist, in his old age.
3. Nunc Dimittis (Luke 2:28-32) – Simeon praised God for allowing him to see his Lord Jesus.

What about Phil 2:5-11? This lovely passage is also called *“Carmen Christi”* (Hymn of Christ). Doesn't our precious Saviour deserve such an exalted poem?

Far from being monotonous or boring, the Bible is a deeply exciting book filled with a variety of genres and writing styles. God has given this multi-faceted book to His children that we might know Him and His will for us – will you not love and delight in it?

Thought: Christians have always been a singing people! How wonderful a God we have!

Prayer: Lord, pray that I will always be filled with the joy of the Lord, daily!

“...speaking in them of these things; in which are some things hard to be understood...”

INTERPRETATION OR APPLICATION FIRST?

Sometimes when you read certain devotionals or listen to some messages, there are some who would take a single verse or a few verses and attempt to draw lessons from them that are simply not found in that verse. Perhaps at face value, it does seem like that is what the Bible is teaching. However, when you examine the verse within the context, one would quickly realise that although the application sounds correct (i.e. it is teaching a lesson that may be biblically-sound), it is based on a wrong interpretation of the verse, and therefore not right.

One very common example would be Revelation 3:20, a verse often quoted by those sharing the gospel. They would say that Jesus is standing outside your heart's door and desires to come in to sup with you. Thus we must open our heart and welcome Him in, i.e. believe in Jesus. However if you examine the verse in its context, you would realise that these are words spoken to the lukewarm church at Laodicea. They were believers whom the Lord loved and was chastening. They were called to repent and turn back to the Lord. Their problem was their backslidden state, and so the Lord in knocking was sincerely asking them to return to a life of blessed communion and fellowship with their Lord and Saviour. Thus it is clear that this verse is not for unbelievers but for believers, for those who had become lacklustre in their relationship with God.

There are many more examples of such misinterpretations of God's Word. Many like these are often well-meaning, and do not really result in any erroneous doctrines. However there are those who in their zeal to make certain applications do butcher God's words and force them to say something that was not intended at all. As a result they mislead believers, and wrest Scriptures to their own destruction.

Let us be serious in reading our Bible, seeking the help of the Holy Spirit in teaching us to understand His word correctly. When we read the word of God, remember – these are the words of life, the words that give us new life, new birth! Do not be too quick to immediately ask “How does this verse apply to me?” before you have answered the basic question, “What does this verse mean?”

Thought: The Bible says that in Christ, we are “new creatures”. The Word of God is powerful, only if we understand it correctly, and take it seriously!

Prayer: Lord, thank You that we have thy Word, “a more sure word of prophecy”.

WHAT IS THE SPIRIT'S ROLE IN INTERPRETATION?

We are indeed very blessed to have wonderful preachers of the Word in our churches. I have personally benefited a great deal learning from them. My pastor has made the Bible so exciting that I have loved it more and more over the years. I have studied the Bible with many resources to help me, but I find that my pastor's interpretation of the Bible is often better than any of the commentaries I have consulted.

I have often listened to his expositions and asked myself, “Why can he see things that we can't?” – has he studied harder than us? (yes, of course) – is he smarter than us? (he denies it!) – does he have any special formulae, any secrets? (he says - no!) So, I asked him directly one day. He seemed genuinely puzzled for a moment, and was at a loss for words. Finally, he said, “It must be the Holy Spirit”. I thought about it for a while, and I concluded that “Yes, he's right”.

The classic passage on why we need the Holy Spirit to understand the Bible is in 1 Corinthians 2. How did Paul preach? Here we read, *“And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power”* (1 Cor 2:4).

How do people come to understand God's truth in such a profound way? *“For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him? even so the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God”* (1 Cor 2:11). It is truly only by the Spirit alone that Paul was able to interpret and preach the words of Scripture in such a powerful and effective way.

Can you also remember the encounter of two disciples with our Lord on the road to Emmaus after His resurrection? They were still at a loss as to the meaning of all the recent events. Our Lord opened their eyes! *“And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself”* (Luke 24:27). The two disciples only had Jesus for a few hours to teach them. But we have the Spirit of God with us always as our teacher!

Read, Pray and Grow! Not in your own wisdom, but through the Holy Spirit's instruction and guidance.

Thought: If we do not pray and ask for the Spirit's guidance, how can we receive?

Prayer: Open my eyes that I may see, glimpses of truth Thou hast for me.

HOW DO I SEE THE CONTEXT?

For the next eleven days, we shall work hard on learning how to interpret the Bible, using the parable of the Good Samaritan as a case study.

You may remember our lesson two days ago about the importance of knowing the context of a particular passage so that we can interpret the passage correctly? Also, we saw earlier on how the wrong method of interpretation can lead to a very unnatural explanation of this passage.

So, today, we ask ourselves – what is the context of the parable of the Good Samaritan? Why did Jesus tell the parable?

In Luke 10:29, we read, *“But he, willing to justify himself, said unto Jesus, And who is my neighbour?”* The context is Jesus’ answer to the question by a lawyer (also known as the scribes). These are not the same as modern day lawyers, but experts in religious laws. We can also see them as theologians. In debating with Jesus, he was trying to demonstrate his own righteousness and prove himself just before God. Hence, through the parable, Jesus had to bring him to the realization of how far he had fallen short of God’s perfect standard, and how he would never be able to inherit eternal life if he persisted in his unjustified state.

Our Lord then tells the parable of the Good Samaritan. By the end of the parable, we can answer the question “Who is his neighbour?”

The punchline or surprise of the parable is that the despised Samaritan was the one who acted in the most neighbourly manner, not the priest nor the Levite. Thus the conclusion was that everyone is considered a neighbour, and we ought to treat everyone as such. With this understanding, we will explore the parable over the next few days!

So then how do we know the context of a passage? Work hard! Know your bible well – not only a particular verse, but the passage itself, the chapter, the book, and the whole Bible itself!

Thought: “The New Testament is in the Old Testament concealed, the Old Testament is in the New Testament revealed” (Augustine).

Prayer: Lord, your Word is a limitless treasure. Please help me to work hard to understand Thy Word, so that I can love You more and more each day, and glorify Thee in my life.

“And he said, Unto you it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God...”

HOW DO I SEE THE AUDIENCE?

In the verse today, it is interesting to see that an expert in the law of Moses was asking Jesus about the law (*“Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?”*). Jesus replied with a question, which he answered correctly. Then we come to Luke 10:29, *“But he, willing to justify himself, said unto Jesus, And who is my neighbour?”*

The question today is: How do I see the intended audience of the parable? Or more importantly, after identifying the audience, what more should I know about him?

Firstly, he was a Jew. He was a typical Jew of his day, self-righteous in his attitude and despising everybody else who was not a Jew, and who had a particular hatred towards the Samaritans. He considered himself far superior to the heathen Samaritan who did not worship the true God.

Secondly, this Jew was a lawyer, an expert in religious law. This is interesting, as the lawyer asked Jesus about the law (of Moses)! His very profession was the study and interpretation of the Torah, what we know as the Old Testament. He had practically spent his whole life dedicated to the Book!

Thirdly, why did the lawyer ask Jesus about the law? Verse 25 said that *“a certain lawyer stood up, and tempted him”*. So Jesus knew that the lawyer’s question was “loaded” – he *“tempted”* Jesus with his question, i.e. he tried to “catch” Jesus off-guard, hoping that Jesus’ answer would contradict the Word of God. Also, verse 29 says, *“But he, willing to justify himself, said unto Jesus, And who is my neighbour?”* The lawyer couldn’t contradict Jesus, but he still wanted to show that he was right.

These are just some initial clues that we need to identify to help us to fully understand the parable before us. Therefore we realise that to understand a particular biblical passage, we often have to understand it from the view of the intended audience, for it is through their eyes that we would be better able to understand what is going on.

Thought: Does a disciplined imagination play an important role in helping us to understand the Word of God?

Prayer: Lord, help me to think more, as I read Your Word!

“....Even as Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.”

WHY MUST I LOOK FOR PARALLEL PASSAGES?

There are times when, beyond examining the context of a passage, we must also look at parallel passages (if any), which can help to shed additional light on the passage. Particularly when reading the gospels, we may find that the different gospel writers focused on various details here and there that help to give us a fuller picture of what exactly was going on in the particular account.

Jesus must have taught His disciples the lesson we're learning today – to look for parallel passages in the Bible! In the parable of the Good Samaritan, the lawyer's answers to Jesus' questions came from the Old Testament:

1. The lawyer said in answer to the question, *“Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself”*. This comes from Deuteronomy 6:5, and is part of the “Shema Yisrael” (Deut 6:4-9) which is a centerpiece of the morning and evening Jewish prayer services.
2. The second part of the answer comes from Lev 19:18: *“Thou shalt not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself: I am the LORD”*.

The Bible has 66 books with different human authors, but there is only one divine author behind all the books – the Holy Spirit. So it's important to know the parallel passages, particularly if the original passage is not easy to understand – often the parallel passages will help us to understand the more difficult passages. In this case, by pointing back to these various verses contained in the Old Testament laws, we learn a very important truth – that Christ came not to abolish the law of Moses, but to teach us how we ought to live out not merely the letter of it, but more so the spirit of it.

Indeed, in order to better interpret sections of Scripture, we should know the whole Bible! Don't say you're too young – start now, and don't miss the blessings!

Thought: *“Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth”* (2 Tim 2:15)

Prayer: Lord, I thank You for such a wonderful book that fills my heart with love and hope and joy daily!

HOW DO I SEE THE MAIN POINT OF THE PASSAGE?

Why did Jesus tell the parable of the Good Samaritan? It is obviously in answer to the lawyer's question, "*And who is my neighbor?*" Now (after finishing the parable), Jesus asked him, "*Which now of these three, thinkest thou, was neighbour unto him that fell among the thieves?*"

So the main point is obviously the "definition" of "neighbour".

The Jews during Jesus' time were very proud people. Even though they had been living under the subjugation of foreigners for many hundreds of years, they still thought that they were superior to all other races, whether Greeks, Romans or Samaritans. They particularly detested and looked down upon the Samaritans, for the Samaritans had been born as a result of intermarriages between the Jews and the heathen nations who inhabited the land. They were looked down upon by the Jews as being unclean. This is blatant racism!

So, our Lord Jesus was teaching the lawyer, "Forget your petty Jewish laws, forget your prejudices – this is against all that God has taught concerning love! You should consider everybody as your neighbor i.e. you should love and help everybody, regardless of race or religion". It must have been a shocking statement to the proud lawyer!

This reminds me of the passage in Matthew 18:21-22, when Peter asked Jesus, "*how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times?*" Peter is so much like us – we try to shirk God's command and limit its scope! But God wants us to abandon ourselves to His love and His mercy, and stop bargaining with Him! That's the only way to live a life "more abundant and free"!

Indeed we ought to stop bargaining with God. Learn to have "the mind of Christ" – read Philippians 2:1-16 ("*Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus*"). Only then will we be able to love our neighbours as ourselves.

Thought: "*If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed.*" (John 8:36)

Prayer: Be Thou my vision, O Lord of my heart.

HOW DO I ANALYSE THE CULTURAL BACKGROUND?

As we study Scripture, we must constantly be aware of the fact that the Bible was written in very different times from what we live in today. We will thus understand it fully only if we know more about the Jews, the Levites, the priests and the Samaritans (and also some geography!) So all of us must do some homework if we love God’s word and want to understand it well!

We had discussed the Samaritans yesterday – they were despised and hated by the Jews. What about the Levites? These were members of the respected tribe of Levi, who were appointed by God to work in the temple (so they are like full-time workers). Then what about the priests? They were the descendants of Aaron (also of the tribe of Levi) who acted as intermediaries between God and the Jews. When the ordinary Jews came to the temple to offer sacrifices to God, the priests would be the ones who would offer the sacrifices on their behalf. They were even more respected than the Levites, as a sort of “inner circle” within the tribe of Levi, tasked to perform a very important spiritual role for the people.

So you can imagine the shock that greeted the poor lawyer – the shocking tale Jesus was telling! While the Levite and priest, men who were supposed to be upright and holy in their ways, spurned the poor traveler and refused to offer any assistance to him, it was the Samaritan (of all persons!) who lent a helping hand, even going the extra mile to do all that he could to help the Jew – someone who, under other circumstances, would have been likely to despise and look down on him! With this knowledge, the impact of the whole parable becomes so much greater.

Such background information is therefore very important when we interpret the parables in the Bible. What was common place and easily understood by the people in the past, might not be so readily evident to us in our present day and age. Therefore we must put in the effort to research and find out more about the various details given in each parable, as we try to come to the right biblical understanding of them.

Thought: Many people misunderstand the Bible – one reason is that they are too lazy to learn the cultural background. Dear teen, don’t be lazy!

Prayer: *“Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth” (2 Tim 2:15).*

WHAT IS AN INCIDENTAL DETAIL?

Read the paragraph below (a famous interpretation of the Parable of the Good Samaritan) – do you agree with this interpretation?

“The man who was going down is Adam. Jerusalem is paradise, and Jericho is the world. The robbers are hostile powers. The priest is the Law, the Levite is the prophets, and the Samaritan is Christ. The wounds are disobedience, the beast is the Lord’s body, the pandochium (that is, the stable [inn]), which accepts all [pan-] who wish to enter, is the Church. And further, the two denarii mean the Father and the Son. The manager of the stable is the head of the Church, to whom its care has been entrusted. And the fact that the Samaritan promises he will return represents the Savior’s second coming.”

This sort of interpretation is called the allegorical method. It sounds interesting. It sounds very clever, and it may even sound very convincing. But is it true? Is it the correction interpretation?

Not so! Just think – this interpretation just depends on the interpreter’s ingenuity – you can interpret it your way, I can do it my own way, and who’s to say who’s right and who’s wrong? This is abuse of scripture!

So what about the beast, the wine, the oil, the inn, the innkeeper, and the two pence? These are just incidental details – our Lord is a master storyteller, and these details help to increase its realism, make it more memorable and engage the listener.

And so we must remember that as we read the Bible, we must always read it “smartly”! Do not try to imagine meaning out of every single detail you see. Instead focus on the main point and the purpose behind the parable.

Thought: How do we know what are incidental details and what are important details? It takes hard work, and much prayer – that’s how we grow to have more and more of “the mind of Christ” day by day!

Prayer: Lord, give me a heart of love that I will treasure all Thy words!

HOW DO I LOOK FOR KEY WORDS OR PHRASES?

Remember that our Lord Jesus told this parable to answer the question, “*who is my neighbour?*” Now at the end of the parable, Jesus asks the same question back at the lawyer. He, having understood the parable, answered Jesus rightly by saying, “*he that showed mercy on him*”. To this response, Jesus then added this wise piece of advice: “*Go, and do thou likewise*”. These verses really give us the punchline of the whole parable, and are the key words and phrases that we should be looking for that give us the main point of the parable.

As we examine this verse closer, do you notice that the lawyer refused to even pronounce the word “*Samaritan*”? But he had no choice but to admit that he should not confine the idea of neighbour to only his fellow Jews! Indeed, there is no limit to who our “*neighbour*” is – we ought to love all men.

This is tough – to consider your “*enemy*” (Samaritans and Gentiles) as your neighbour! You can see how tough it is when you read the Book of Acts! Remember the story of how Peter went to see Cornelius? Even though the Bible had promised that the gospel would be preached to the Gentiles, Peter was still very reluctant to break the Jewish dietary laws, and God had to give him a vision to turn him around! But poor Peter, he still found it very hard to break the traditions that he grew up in. Years later, when he went to Antioch, he was afraid of offending some of the Jews from Jerusalem. What did he do? “*He withdrew and separated himself, fearing them which were of the circumcision*” (Galatians 2:12) – and he was publicly reprimanded by Paul – Paul wasn’t being rude, but he loved God and the gospel, and the gospel was at stake!

So who are our neighbours? We should stop asking such questions, and open our hearts to everybody – just like our loving God. And even as Jesus commanded to “*Go, and do thou likewise*”, we must realise that love is not mere emotion, but must be practiced and put into action.

Thought: Don’t major on minors!

Prayer: Lord, open my eyes and ears to know what is important, and what is peripheral.

HOW DO I LOOK FOR CONNECTING WORDS?

Our contact group has been studying the book of Romans. We had been going through chapters 1, 2 and the first part of chapter 3 over many months, and were all looking to the BIG TURNING POINT! In the early chapters of Romans, the apostle Paul convinced us thoroughly that “all have sinned”. Now on to Romans 3:21, *“But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested”*. “But now” are two little words that make a BIG BANG – from the doom and gloom of universal sin to the wonders of salvation! Just to read these two little words “But now” rejoices the heart!

Now we get back to the parable of the Good Samaritan. In verses 31 and 32, we are introduced to the priest and the Levite. The word “and” is used repeatedly, showing that the story continues to flow in the same direction with no big turning points. Now look at verse 33 – you will notice that it starts with a very big “But”. For here, we are shown the sharp and shocking contrast between the first two passers-by, and the Samaritan. Whereas the priest and the Levite callously *“passed by on the other side”*, the Samaritan noticed the Jew and deliberately *“came where he was”*; most amazing of all, we see that *“he had compassion on him”*! The use of the word “But” would therefore alert the reader to the fact that the big “twist” in the story is coming; that something unexpected and quite opposite to what had happened previously is about to happen.

Remember, every single word of Scripture is there for a reason! As you know God’s word more and more, look out for these seemingly inconsequential “buts” and “therefores” and “notwithstanding”, or even just the simple “for” and “and”, for these all help to shed additional light on a passage. And you will surely understand and rejoice in the Word of God more and more!

Thought: The more we love God, the more we’ll love His Word. The more we love His Word, the more we’ll love God!

Prayer: Lord, teach me to love Thy Word more and more each day.

HOW DO I OUTLINE THE PASSAGE?

God is a God of order, and he had made us such that all of us appreciate some degree of order in our environment.

It's the same with our minds. When we read the Bible, we often have to organise the passage, so that we can understand it better. One way to do this is to outline the passage.

Now read Luke 10:30-37. How would you outline the passage?

This is a narrative passage, and so it should have a beginning, the main body, and an end – simple. Yes, it's simple - but consciously knowing this helps us to understand the passage better. Here is an example of how this can be done:

Theme: Who is my neighbour?

V. 30 - The Hapless Man

V. 31 - 32 - The Unhelpful Religious Men

V. 33 - 35 - The Helpful Samaritan

V. 36 - 37 - Am I a Helpful Neighbour?

The idea of outlining a passage may appear to be a no-brainer, but very often we are too lazy to do so, and so miss much valuable lessons. Have you learned the theory of entropy? It says that things tend to go from an initial orderly state to an ultimately disorderly state! I confess my brain is often in a state of disorderliness, and so I have to work hard to get things organized, outlined – it's worth all the hard work!

If you find a passage difficult to understand, it often helps to read it again, and outline the passage to give you some landmarks! From this, you will be able to draw out the main points and lessons that you can take away from that particular passage.

Thought: Is there more than one way to outline a given passage of the Bible?

Prayer: Lord, forgive me for the many times I take Thy word lightly.

WHAT MUST I BEAR IN MIND IN APPLICATION?

The lawyer in this account sounds very much like many of us. He knows all the right answers, and can quote whole chunks of the Bible like a breeze! This is his reply to Jesus when questioned about the law: *“Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself.”* Notice what Jesus said in reply? *“Thou hast answered right: this do, and thou shalt live.”*

Now stop – and think! If you were the lawyer, how would you go on? How do you apply the verse to yourself? You have quoted the verse (*“thou shalt love the Lord thy God...”*), but can you apply it to yourself? The lawyer obviously ignored Jesus’ exhortation, but instead continued to try to challenge Jesus. For him, it was but an intellectual debate, and he had no interest in applying what he had just learnt.

How about for us? Why do we spend so much time trying to understand the Bible? When we understand passages, and think of the applications, we must always follow up with a true sincere desire to do all that God’s Word instructs us to. Yet in doing that, we also realise that as much as we can try to apply it by ourselves, we can’t! We’d just kneel down to Jesus and say, “Lord, I don’t love God with even half my heart... soul... strength... mind, and I can’t! – unless You help me through Your Holy Spirit”!

The question today is “what must I bear in mind in application?” I think the most important thing to bear in mind is that we must not just say, but do! Yet realise that we are unable to apply any of these lessons in our lives unless we are given the strength by the Holy Spirit. It is us working in conjunction with God - we desire to obey, and the Holy Spirit gives us the strength and resolve to be able to do so.

There’s no point understanding the Bible “intellectually” without applying the lessons to our own lives.

Thought: Thank God for good pastors/teachers who help us to understand the Word of God, and teach us how to apply it to our lives!

Prayer: Lord, help me not only to memorise Bible verses, but to understand them and work in my heart and soul so that I will love You more in spirit and in truth.

HOW DO I APPLY IT TO MYSELF?

We have come a long way, in learning how to interpret the Bible. But I fear that we may lose sight of the ultimate purpose of doing all these – all to the glory of God. We must apply all the lessons from the Bible to ourselves, otherwise we might as well go and play ball! One of the most dangerous things we can do is to interpret a passage perfectly, draw out all the right lessons – and then think to ourselves, “so-and-so really needs to learn this lesson!”

As we read, meditate and understand God’s Word, as we humble ourselves and yield to the instructions within, what happens is that we would be transformed by the renewing of our minds. That is what the Bible can do to you! If we read it seriously, and constantly ask what lessons are to be had, and sincerely try to live by it, our thoughts will be refreshed by the teachings in God’s Words; our lives will be transformed, conformed to the image of Christ and not the world. The result of this would be a life that is good and acceptable in the sight of God! Now don’t we all want this to happen in our lives?

Some teens dye their hair and think that they are non-conformists! Yes, to an extent that’s true – but that applies only to their external appearance. What about the “internals”? Here – true Christians are the true non-conformists. We don’t rebel for the sake of rebellion, but we don’t conform to the world – why? - because we want to conform to the God who loves us! – and be transformed “internally” by the renewing of our minds – that’s what matters, not the externals!

Why do we want to do this? Because we love Him, who first loved us. We want to please Him, and so we want to know His will (which is “good, and acceptable and perfect”). That takes a lifetime – because our minds, our emotions, and our wills have all been corrupted as part of the Fall, and it takes more than a lifetime (and beyond) to fully conform ourselves to His image.

But we want to start now, and grow more and more Christ-like each day – we can start practically by reading, understanding and obeying His word daily! What an exciting journey!

Thought: Jesus said, *“if ye love me, keep my commandments”*.

Prayer: Lord, help me to let Thy Word be so much a part of me that I will love what You love, and do what You want me to do.

WHAT DOES MEDITATION MEAN?

To meditate is to think deeply and carefully about God's Word for an extended period of time. It is to dwell on it, to contemplate it, study it, mull over it in your mind. Such deep thinking will often be done in silent seclusion, away and undisturbed from the hustle and bustle around us.

For the Christian, meditation consists of the following:

1. A spiritual mind – only a spiritual person will delight in the law of the Lord. An unbeliever may study the Word and find it most interesting and agreeable, but his knowledge will be academic and not a delight to his soul.
2. Spiritual matters - meditation is often used in relation to religious, spiritual thoughts. You would not refer to studying your academic texts as meditation, no matter how intense and rigorous the study may be. There is a higher purpose, when we meditate upon the Law – the inspired, inerrant, infallible Word of God!
3. Time – deep thinking and contemplation of the Word requires an extended period of time. Here the Psalmist meditates day and night, signifying the fact that he was continually thinking on and pondering over the words of Scripture.

Meditation also requires a mind wholly devoted to and focused on God's Word. To meditate is not to mindlessly repeat or recite God's Word, but a mindful contemplation that permeates and transforms the soul.

So now that you know what meditation means, have you ever truly done it? Do you delight in reading God's Word, or is it a chore? If we say we delight in God's Word but we do not think about it often and in depth, are we truly meditating? The food we like, we will eat slowly and savour each bite, each chew, focusing on it. Our favourite subjects and hobbies – we think about them and do them above and beyond what is necessary. Our thoughts will wander easily to them. Favourite novels – we read over and over again, dwelling on and relishing each word, phrase, and sentence. How about the Word of God?

Thought: What adjective describes this man in Psalm 1 who delights in God's Word and meditates upon it all the time? Is meditating easy? Does it come naturally?

Prayer: May I love God's Word and meditate upon it.

WHY MUST WE MEDITATE?

In this passage, the result of David's constant meditation on the testimonies of God as recorded in Scripture, is greater understanding than his teachers the priests. It is not the objective per se. He does not meditate to compete with them but rather because he loves the Law and it has preserved him from his enemies that are ever with him, and the evil way that so easily befalls. He meditates because he loves God's Word, wants to grow in the Word and to deepen his understanding of the ways of the God that He loves.

For a Christian, the acquisition of Bible knowledge is just the beginning and, on its own, is incomplete. Understanding is comprehending knowledge so that it may be applied, the result of which is wisdom. We meditate so that we may understand. Meditation is not for the sake of being religiously pious.

Each Christian has his own race to run. Leaders, teachers, spiritual friends and mentors are but instruments to instruct and help us to gain understanding of God's Word. But their understanding, however great, can only help us so far. They cannot see into your heart. Thus in this way, their understanding is limited and will not transform your life. As Matthew Henry writes, meditating is preaching to yourself that you may come to understand your own heart. It is to experience God in a real and personal way. The counsel of others cannot replace direct counsel from the very Word itself which each of us must study, and discern for ourselves.

If a student is to gain more spiritual understanding than his teacher, a teacher ought to be pleased and himself spurred to study and meditate upon the Word more. Consider also the strength of a Christian whose understanding is heavily dependent on another. It is all very well when that person is spiritual and present in your life. But even leaders backslide. They also come and go, or they may pass on. Is this the foundation upon which a Christian seeking wisdom wishes to build his faith?

Thought: Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and forever. (Hebrews 13:8).

Prayer: Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law (Psalm 119:18).

WHEN DO WE MEDITATE?

After the death of Moses, God commissioned Joshua with a daunting task – to conquer and enter the Promised Land. As Joshua assumed leadership of the Israelites, God instructed Joshua with a command, that *"this book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth; but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein"*.

Joshua was to keep the law within him. The Word to a Christian is spiritual food, essential for life. Meditating upon it is like tasting, chewing, savouring and digesting it. In this manner it does not depart from us, but remains within to nourish and transform. At the same time, our mouths are one of the chief means by which we communicate wisdom from the Word of God to edify others.

To *"meditate therein day and night"* does not mean literally every single moment. Joshua would have had many tasks to do in preparing, instructing and organizing the people. All the more he would have needed the wisdom to fulfill his calling and seek out opportunities to meditate upon the Word. This he was to do all the time – continually, during the day – at work when he was the busiest but also at night when he would be likely at rest. It is continual in the sense that there is this complete and unceasing reliance on and abiding in Christ and His Word. To stop would be to rely on his own strength and wisdom.

Too often the Word of God is something we just gloss over. At best we may memorise a verse or two. But true and constant meditation is something we fall far short of achieving. Meditation does not come naturally. It not only requires love of God's Word, it takes discipline.

Further, we are commanded to meditate constantly as we go about our daily lives. It is not optional. In our interactions, actions, decisions and reactions we ought to be always reflecting, and then acting or reacting in the light of God's Word. Whenever we have a spare moment from our activities or work, let our minds be fixed on the Word of God. In this way, we are meditating all the time. Do you wonder why you do not grow spiritually or show scant improvement?

Thought: What are practical steps I can take to meditate more?

Prayer: LORD, give me the discipline to obey Your command to meditate continually upon Your Word.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF MEDITATION?

An awesome task and responsibility had been entrusted to Joshua. It would require great faith and wisdom. First, knowledge had been imparted, then understanding, and finally, application. The culmination of continual meditation is action, that we, like Joshua may do the will of God in our lives.

The result of doing all of God’s will in complete obedience is prosperity and success. This is something promised in both verses 7 and 8. God will give them His best blessings. For Joshua, his task was clear - and that was the conquest of the Promised Land. In order for his mission to be successful, he was to abide continually in the Word of God. As long as he obeyed, the Lord would bless him and help him fight his battles. However, the moment disobedience and sin crept into the camp, they would be punished. For example, because of the sin of Achan, Israel lost the battle of Ai; similarly when they did not seek God’s will, they succumbed to the deceit of the Gibeonites.

Likewise for us, the same principles apply. Of course in our day and age, prosperity blessings are no longer tied closely to physical blessings as it was in the Old Testament times for the nation of Israel. Our mission today is spiritual in nature, and likewise blessings are spiritual as well. As long as we abide in God’s Word, we will be blessed, and granted success in our spiritual battles. God our Father is always watching over us from heaven, and will always give His children what is best for them, as long as they obey His Word.

God promised Joshua success in his battles ahead against the Canaanites, despite the fact that the odds were stacked against them. We too can claim this promise now in present trials and tribulations, and for those that will invariably strew our paths ahead. We are forgetful creatures and so prone to stray. Continual meditation upon God’s Word reminds us of our weaknesses and our need to have utmost dependence upon God. It instructs us and gives us strength and faith to live obedient and hence victorious Christian lives.

Thought: How many times does the phrase ‘be strong and of a good courage’ occur in this chapter?

Prayer: Lord, may you teach me to pray always according to thy will.

HOW DO I KNOW IF I AM MEDITATING CORRECTLY?

The new division in Psalm 119 opens with the psalmist unreservedly declaring his ardent love for the law. It is not just any law, but the law of God. It is because of this intense love for the Word, that he will have it as his meditation at all times. This is a man in love with God’s Word. He cannot help but delight in and meditate upon it. Meditation involves not only the mind but also the heart.

We can imagine being in love, if we have not already experienced it. Practically every waking moment will be consumed with thoughts of the object of your affection. You will think about him or her incessantly and seek to know every little thing about them. You will study and appreciate all their strengths, weaknesses and quirks. Time spent with them passes all too quickly.

How do you really feel about the Word of God? How many of us can say we truly do love it, and constantly yearn to meditate upon it? Do we really appreciate what it means to love the Word with all your heart and soul like the Psalmist here?

Do you love reading and studying the Word? You may find some parts to be interesting, practical and comforting, while some other parts to be tedious, difficult, boring, or even irrelevant. Or perhaps you once loved the Word but the love has grown cold or been replaced by a love for the things of the world, or has been clouded by sin?

Can meditation be correct that results from such a heart? Dear teen, how is your heart? The condition of your heart will tell you whether you are meditating correctly.

Thought: Is indifference or sin clouding your ability to know, understand and apply God’s Word?

Prayer: May I meditate upon Your Word with clean hands and a pure heart.

SHOULD I MEDITATE EVEN IF THE PASSAGE IS EASY?

After you spend a certain amount of time in church, there would be those few passages that would be mentioned again and again, and they would quickly become very familiar to you. Many of them are quite straightforward and simple to understand, and they would be what we regard as ‘easy’ passages. Though they are indeed very wonderful and precious verses, yet because of familiarity, we seldom think too much upon them - we don’t think that verses like these need too much meditation as we already understand them.

But we should stop and ask - do we really understand everything that is to know about in the Bible?

Jeremiah was a prophet specifically called by the LORD to an awesome and difficult task to tell of the ruin of his beloved nation. This was a message that was not well received by the stiff-necked people. God spoke to Jeremiah directly, who was undoubtedly also spiritually knowledgeable as the voice of God to the people; yet what was Jeremiah’s attitude to the Word of God?

He spoke of how he found the Words of God, and carefully chewed on them and ingested them. As a result he found them to be the joy of his heart! Although the task set before him was immense and onerous, he never blamed God but instead took refuge in the familiar yet wonderfully rich words of God.

True, there are passages and books in the Bible that are more readily understandable. But do not take God’s Word for granted or lack faith in the ability of familiar passages to reveal spiritual insights to you again and again. Is the knowledge of God exhaustible? Can we come to a complete knowledge of God? If you do not think you are hungry, would you want to eat and hence be filled? To think of a passage as easy is to begin to be filled with pride and to become complacent.

Thought: David and Jeremiah meditated upon the Word constantly. How much more so should we?

Prayer: Lord, help me to continually find new truths even in familiar passages.

DOES MEDITATION ONLY FOCUS ON ONE PASSAGE?

In this Psalm, as David considers the onslaught of the enemies' persecutions, causing his spirit to be overwhelmed and his heart desolate, he found solace in God. In verse 5, he shared how he looked back and reflected on God's faithfulness. He thought to the 'days of old', of events in time past whereby God had so graciously rescued him. He then meditates on all God's present work that he sees. God is everywhere, to be found in everything, great and small, by divine revelation in His Word, the miracle of life and His daily provisions. Finally, David looks wider to the natural world as he reflects in wonder at God's work revealed in creation. Through this, he experiences comfort, and knows that all he has to do is to call upon the Lord, to stretch forth his hands unto Him, and He will certainly deliver.

Perhaps you may be experiencing trials and tribulations, going through difficulties similar to what David went through. David's spirit was overwhelmed and desolate under the attacks of his enemies. Hence in his meditation he casts a wide net to fill his thirsty soul. Remembering the past accorded comfort of God's faithfulness in His dealings with His children, whilst the works of Creation testify of God's continual presence and power in all things. This we can see if we would but look!

At the same time, the Word of God is so rich and so deep that we may wish to focus on just one passage, or a verse, or even part of a verse. Just as an entire sermon can be expounded from one verse, your meditation for a whole day can, too. From this you will be able to delve deeper and perhaps be able to extract greater and more lasting spiritual understanding than if you were to meditate on several verses or passages. This takes focus and discipline.

Whether you focus on one passage or several depends on the purpose and circumstances of your meditation. Just as we need both a micro and macro understanding of the Bible – Bible theology (which is the study of the Bible from the historical perspective of revelation through individual books) as well as systematic theology (thematic perspective).

Thought: Spurgeon calls memory the handmaiden of hope. Can you do so too?

Prayer: LORD, may my faith be strengthened as I remember Your faithfulness and see Your presence always in all things.

DO YOU MEDITATE AMIDST YOUR TROUBLES?

The identity of the Psalmist who penned Psalm 119 is uncertain; some attribute it to David, others to Ezra. What we do know is that princes, people who were noble rulers, were speaking against the psalmist. It was not just one prince, but numerous. The idea of them 'sitting' gives the impression they were gathered together. Yet, amidst all these attacks from influential people, whose words carry weight and power, we find the Psalmist strangely at peace. He does not take things into his own hands, nor look to man. Instead he meditates upon the Word of God, unperturbed.

When people sin against us or when things go wrong and we are afraid, our natural reaction is to do something or talk to someone. We simply must! Furthermore, in our fast paced world we are bombarded by messages to 'seize the day', 'be proactive' and that we are the masters of our own destiny. Meditating and praying? This is not a time for inaction! Foolishness! Meditate and pray later.

But consider: is it inaction to be still, shutting out all that is going on around you, searching and meditating upon God's Word for wisdom and submitting your prayers humbly before the Throne of Grace? These are deliberate things that the Psalmist does – he retreats to somewhere quiet where he meditates on the perfect Word. It is his counselor. He seeks God's will and wisdom, prays and meditates before the Lord. He bides his time and calms his soul. He encourages himself in the Lord. Only then, will he act.

We ought to meditate all the more during difficult circumstances, and as we do, we must be unwavering, focused, not letting fears and sin cloud our ability to genuinely understand and apply God's Word. When we do so, we will be able to draw strength, solace and comfort from the Word of God, and realise that the solutions to our problems have already been given to us through the Word!

Thought: Do the sins of others bring out good or evil in you?

Prayer: LORD may I find calm and guidance in Your Word in the midst of the storms of life.

WHAT SHOULD MY ATTITUDE BE DURING MEDITATION?

Our outward actions – what comes out of our mouths, and the inward thoughts and intents of our hearts need to be aligned. The visible and invisible must be one and the same - sincere. A good heart will be reflected outwardly. But a deceitful heart can reflect both bad and good – such good is not really good in the sight of God who sees our hearts like no man, even our own selves. Our God is an all-seeing God.

It is the words of Jehovah, our strength and author of salvation that we are meditating upon and to Him alone our meditation must “be acceptable”. He is our Creator, the Rock who gives us His feeble creatures strength, the loving God who sent His Son to redeem us who were once condemned for our sins. Are we conscious of this great God, when we meditate upon His Word? Do we fear Him, and cherish the very words that He has so graciously bestowed upon us?

It is relatively easy to say and then do the ‘right’ things to portray a spiritual Christian or to please others. We often do the right things because we know it’s the right thing to do, but inwardly our hearts feel quite the opposite, or are half-hearted. Such an attitude is unacceptable. We must not delude ourselves into thinking that we can hide anything from God. He sees into the innermost recesses of our hearts, things that we may not want to admit even to ourselves or may not even be aware of because we deceive ourselves.

We need to remember what we are meditating upon – the perfect, pure and righteous Word of God. Further, we sinners as we meditate are communing with and before the holy and almighty LORD. Our attitude should be one of humility, reverence and worship.

Thought: What is a presumptuous sin? (See Psalm 19:13)

Prayer: May my heart be pure and free of all sin when I meditate upon Your perfect and holy Word.

ARE MY OWN THOUGHTS THAT IMPORTANT?

A man bids his guest to partake of his feast of bread and delicious meats. He calls his guests to eat and drink – enjoy! He wishes his guest well and generously welcomes him to his table to sup. On the outside, he initially appears very warm and genuine, happy to be the host. However, that is not how he really is. His heart is not with the guests, and it soon gives him away. He is what his heart says, not his mouth. He is dishonest and insincere. He had invited these guests to satisfy some ulterior motive, and had some hidden agenda to fulfil. Such actions do not bode well for the guests at all. No matter how good a spread the host is able to provide, the guest will be left with a bitter taste in his mouth, and will want to vomit out the very food he has eaten. All his niceties, sweet welcoming words will mean nothing, for the guest has discerned his heart.

As we are what we think in our hearts, yes, your own thoughts are important when meditating. If our heart is not sincere and free from sin or hidden agendas as we meditate, then the result, the fruits of our meditation will be tainted, however righteous and pleasing they may appear to be. We know that God knows far more than the unsuspecting guest at the feast of this insincere host. He knows the deepest thoughts of our heart. There is no point in making a show of meditating on God's Word, if inwardly we have no desire at all for it. We need to be totally and completely honest before God and men, lest we be hypocrites as the Pharisees.

We can guard against hypocrisy by putting on the mind of Christ (Phil 2), moulding and aligning our thoughts to that of Christ. This is a lifelong process. In this light, our thoughts are not paramount; rather they are submitted to and subsumed by Christ's.

Remember that God always knows the thoughts of our hearts. We may be able to fool men, but we can never fool God. We can put up a facade of holiness, we can appear to be regular in our daily devotions and meditations. We can even share and talk about how wonderful our quiet time has been. But if it is not true sincere and honest meditation before the Lord, then it is all in vain.

Thought: Is it more difficult to control your thoughts or your actions?

Prayer: LORD, may I put on the mind of Christ as I meditate upon Your Word.

“That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.”

WHAT WOULD THE RESULT OF RIGHT MEDITATION BE?

In 1 Timothy 4:15, Paul’s instruction to the young pastor Timothy was to meditate on all that he had been taught. To give himself entirely to this requires diligence and constancy. Such inward spiritual discipline would certainly yield outward progress in Timothy’s life. It would be a life that would profit much, that would visibly bear spiritual fruit as it would “appear” to all around him in all aspects of his life. The result would be an abundant pastoral ministry and a church advancing in the grace and knowledge of the Lord. This would be Timothy’s, and any pastor’s greatest desire – to see the salvation of lost souls, and to see his spiritual children growing in their faith.

The ultimate goal of meditation is not just to have a sort of personal growth that remains hidden. You may claim that you are regular in your Quiet Time, and are constantly meditating upon God’s Word, but does that result in a changed life? Does it bear fruit that edifies others and glorifies God? With knowledge and understanding, there must be wisdom manifested by application! Christians are called to be the salt and light of the Earth.

Would a person who truly knows and understand God’s Word keep it to himself, shun fellowship, service and Bible study? Or would he be someone who does not make any progress at all in his spiritual life? ‘Of course not’ and ‘that’s certainly not me!’, you might say. Perhaps so. Our spiritual progress must appear to all, in all things. Are there people in your life that you struggle to be a good testimony to? Somebody whom you find so difficult, or some whom you even consider an enemy? Are there areas in your life in which you find it easier to be more spiritual and faithful than others? You may be diligent in service at church but lazy at home or school. Or perhaps vice versa. Perhaps this is you?

Realise that when we truly meditate on God’s Word and apply all that we learn into our lives, it would certainly result in real and effective change in our lives. That is the power of the Word of God. Has your life been changed? Can the people around you see it?

Thought: What attributes of the fruit of the Spirit do you struggle to exhibit? Are any of these attributes optional?

Prayer: LORD, may I strive through Your Word to be a good and faithful testimony to all in everything for Your glory.

HOW DO WE INTERPRET NARRATIVES?

In the past 2 months, we have been learning about the basic principles of Biblical interpretation. It is now time to put theory into practice, by going through some case studies of the interpretation of various genres. Over the next few days, we will start off by looking at Ruth 1:1-18 as an example of how we should interpret narratives.

First and foremost, we must bear in mind that narratives are true stories written by a Divine Author. Often, the danger in reading a narrative in the Bible is to treat it as a mere fictional account or a fairytale. As much as they are surely enjoyable and interesting to read, we would lose much of the value of these accounts if we read them just for entertainment. Rather, we must always bear in mind that these are real people (we'll be meeting many of them in heaven!) who lived in real places during a real period in history. Remember also that it is God who inspired every word of these narratives. Hence, rather than just taking them at face value, we must also consider the fact that He who makes no mistakes has carefully chosen what to include and what not to include in each account. As you read, keep asking yourself: What is the purpose of including this narrative in the Bible? What can I learn from it? What is the significance of this event? Why did God choose to include this seemingly minor detail?

Narratives are unique in the sense that the application is not always immediately obvious. Yet, this also means that there are usually multiple takeaway lessons, if we would only put careful thought into reading them. This means not just reading the text itself, but also considering other relevant factors such as: What is the context of this account? Who was the author, and why and to whom did he write it? What happened before and after? Where and when did the events take place? Who are the characters involved? What else do we know about them?

Sounds tough? Perhaps. But the more we read of the Bible, the more we learn to appreciate it and realise that it is truly a living Book full of precious lessons for all who would earnestly and diligently seek out its truths. Dear teen, may you truly find much joy in God's Word even as you continue to learn more about how to study this Book of Books.

Thought: "For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning".

Prayer: Lord, help me to understand and appreciate Your Word.

WHAT IS THE CONTEXT OF RUTH 1:1-18?

As we have learned earlier, context is key to a full and proper understanding of a text. "A text without context is a pretext" – if we do not properly examine the context of a particular passage, we run the risk of misusing or misapplying the text to support something that it doesn't actually support. Hence, when interpreting biblical narratives, it is always important to first consider its context.

Ruth 1:1 tells us that the entire story took place "*in the days when the judges ruled*". This phrase was included not merely to indicate the time when the events happened, but more as an indication of the spiritual condition during that time. The book of Judges sheds some light on the state of affairs. Judges 17:6 tells us something rather alarming – the days of the judges was a period when "*every man did that which was right in his own eyes*". This was one of the lowest points in Israel's history. Without a king to govern the affairs of the nation, the people lived in a state of lawlessness and anarchy. God's law was forgotten, and the people turned instead to false gods and indulged in immorality.

What relation does this have to the book of Ruth? First of all, we see God's justice at work. The famine which sparked off the whole chain of events in the book happened not by chance, but was a result of God's divine working. God had already warned the Israelites that if they turned away from Him and broke His commandments, their "*land shall not yield her increase, neither shall the trees of the land yield their fruits*" (Lev 26:14-15, 20). What God has said, He will surely bring to pass, so let us never take what God says lightly. Secondly, the events in Ruth bear a sharp contrast to what was going on in the nation of Israel. While the whole nation of Israel had forsaken the Lord, one sole Gentile girl found faith in the Lord and forsook all to follow Him. And even though Israel was unfaithful to God, yet God in His great mercy continued to be faithful to them, by preserving the line through Ruth and Boaz that would eventually give rise to the Promised Messiah, Jesus Christ!

Dear teen, isn't it amazing how we see God working, even in every little detail of history? Nothing happens by chance, for we worship a God who is sovereign and in control over all the affairs of man.

Thought: Knowing more about the context helps me understand so much more about a passage!

Prayer: Lord, help me to be diligent in searching Your Word more thoroughly.

HOW DO I SEE THE MAIN POINT OF THIS PASSAGE?

Ruth 1:1-18 is a very interesting passage, full of deep truths and meaning. Though, on the outset, it appears to be little more than a heartwarming story about family relationships, but if we dig a bit deeper, we realise it is so much more than that.

The passage starts off with a brief description of how the three main characters, Ruth, Naomi and Orpah, came to be in the situation in which they found themselves. Stranded in a heathen land with three freshly dug graves, two Gentile daughters-in-law, a heavy heart and nowhere else to turn, Naomi made a decision to return to her homeland in Judah. At the same time, she tried to persuade her 2 daughters-in-law not to go with her, but to remain with their kinsmen in their country. At first, both Ruth and Orpah proclaimed with one accord that they wanted to return with her. However, further coaxing from Naomi revealed their true colours. This brings us to the climax of the passage in verse 14, which is how they individually responded ultimately. Orpah's kiss to Naomi was a farewell kiss for she had decided to stay in Moab with her family, while Ruth had decided to cleave unto Naomi and followed her all the way back to Israel.

Choices are what every Christian will have to make at various points in our lives, and this passage teaches us a very important lesson – which is the main point of this passage – on making choices: a good choice is not necessarily always the best choice. Orpah made the choice to bid farewell to her mother- and sister-in-law. We cannot say that it was wrong in itself for her to do so – the realities of the situation made it such that it would be more practical for her to stay behind rather than to pursue a seemingly hopeless life. However, Ruth made the far better choice to follow God's will. This ultimately led her to a land where she was able to worship and know God, and to see God's will fulfilled in the child that she would bear.

Dear teen, may you continue to seek the Lord even as you strive to dig deeper in His Word, trusting that His Holy Spirit will reveal to you its precious truths.

Thought: Understanding the main point of a narrative helps a lot in interpreting it.

Prayer: Lord, grant me a clearer understanding of Your Word.

HOW CAN I DIVIDE THIS PASSAGE?

How do you normally study for a History or Biology exam, when there are a lot of facts to remember? Rather than just trying to cram all the facts haphazardly into the brain, most people would find some way of breaking the information down into smaller bits so that it is easier to digest.

Similarly, that’s how it is sometimes with Bible reading. While reading a passage as a whole will give you the gist of it, it is helpful also to divide it into different parts in order to help you focus on different points which the author is trying to make. It is like having paragraphs to organize the main thoughts in a book.

In this passage which we have been looking at, an easy and obvious way of dividing it would be to consider the 2 main characters, Ruth and Orpah, separately. As you recall from yesterday’s reading, the main point of the passage is about making godly choices. The actions and responses of these 2 women are in stark contrast to each other – Ruth ended up staying true to her word and followed Naomi all the way back to Judah, whereas Orpah eventually changed her mind and chose to remain in her homeland. This provides a nice and neat framework for understanding and interpreting this passage. We can first consider verses 11-13 for the reasons that persuaded Orpah to stay behind amongst her kinsmen. Next, we look to verses 15-17 for the reasons that motivated Ruth to choose to go with Naomi. Sandwiched in between is verse 14, which sums up both their decisions.

From these two sections with contrasting ideas, we can then make the necessary comparisons and delve in more deeply to draw out the lessons and applications which we can apply to our own lives.

As we study the Bible, it would be helpful for us to also try to segment the passages that we study into different parts, in order that we can better understand the main gist and content of it.

Thought: Comparing and contrasting can bring out many lessons!

Prayer: Lord, grant me the wisdom to rightly discern Thy Word.

WHAT ARE THE INCIDENTAL DETAILS?

Have you ever read a story that related simply the bare facts without any further details? Probably not, for such a story would have been too brief and colourless, not to mention boring, for you to even remember it!

As much as narratives teach spiritual truths, they are also stories that relate certain events and happenings. As such, there are bound to be incidental details here and there which might not add much spiritual value, but that are still helpful in giving colour and adding an additional dimension to the story. For example, verse 5 informs us that both Ruth's as well as Orpah's husband, Mahlon and Chilion, had died. Though there isn't much to say spiritually about this fact, it is still useful in helping us to understand what led up to the events in verses 6-18. Otherwise, it would not make much sense for Ruth and Orpah to even consider going back with Naomi to Judah!

Of course, it is important also not to place too much reliance on these incidental details. After all, they are simply that – incidental details – and nothing more. They might help in making the story more understandable, but they should never be twisted out of context to squeeze out some spiritual application that was never there in the first place. For example, it would be absurd to say that this passage teaches us that we should wait for our spouses to die before we can learn how to make godly choices!

Dear teen, may you thus pray for much discernment even as you study God's Word. Learn to separate spiritual truths from other incidental details, and do not confuse the two.

Thought: Knowing which are main ideas and which are details can help a lot in understanding the Bible!

Prayer: Lord, teach me with the Holy Spirit's help.

WHAT ARE THE KEY WORDS?

Continuing our study of this passage, we look again at the main verse of this whole passage, verse 14.

“And they lifted up their voice, and wept again: and Orpah kissed her mother in law; but Ruth clave unto her.”

Reading it closely, you will find that there are two words that sum up so well the opposite responses of the two women. On one end, we have Orpah who “kissed” her mother-in-law; on the other end, we see Ruth who “clave” unto her. These two key words of the whole passage depict vividly the difference between a good choice and a better choice.

For Orpah, we cannot say that she was entirely wrong in making the choice to stay in her homeland. It is clear from her actions in this verse that she had a deep sense of affection for her mother-in-law and was sorry to have to part with her; hence she kissed her farewell. It was not a mere goodbye wave or a casual handshake; this kiss showed that she did truly care for and love Naomi most intimately. However, her love for other things such as her own personal comforts and her concern over her own future kept her from making the better choice.

On the other hand, although Ruth displayed no outward sign of affection as Orpah did, the choice that she made reflects even better the state of her heart – it was one that now “clave” unto Naomi. The word “clave” here carries the idea of clinging tightly and following close after, or even to be joined together (as it is used in Gen 2:24 to describe the husband-wife relationship). Ruth was now determined to stick tightly to her mother-in-law – not just in the physical sense of following her all the way home, but more so in the sense of embracing all that Naomi had and believed in, including the God that she believed in and the faith that she followed.

Thought: To kiss or to cleave?

Prayer: Lord, grant me a better understanding of the very words of Your Word.

HOW DO I OUTLINE THIS PASSAGE?

Having an outline can be very useful in studying the Bible. Coming up with an outline means that we must first have a good understanding of the main points of the passage and an idea of how the thoughts flow in the passage. An outline also provides a good overview of the main ideas of a passage, so that a reader can know at a glance what the main points are.

After the introduction (verses 1-5), the passage can be split into three main portions. Verses 6-7 give us Naomi's decision to return home. Verses 8-18 then give us Orpah's and Ruth's responses to Naomi's decision – Orpah's reasons for remaining “home” in Moab are found in verses 8-13, while verses 14-18 give us Ruth's resolve for returning “home” to Israel:

1. Naomi's decision (6-7)
2. Orpah's response: stay (8-13)
3. Ruth's response: go (14-18)

The next step would then be to rephrase these main points so that they are in line with the main point of the passage. If you recall, it is about making godly choices that are not just good choices but the best choice. So the outline could be something like this:

1. A choice to make (6-7)
2. A good choice: material blessings (8-13)
3. The best choice: spiritual blessings (14-18)

Having such an outline would help us have the right frame of mind as we read through and study this passage, for it would not only easily segment the thoughts, but it would also guide us in finding the applications and lessons that we can draw from it. With the right amount of effort, patience and prayer, we would be able to do likewise for any narrative that we read in the Bible. This would enable our study of the Bible to be so much more fruitful and enjoyable.

Thought: There is logic and sequence to every passage in the Bible.

Prayer: Lord, thank You for Your Word which is so clear!

WHAT IS THE APPLICATION OF THIS PASSAGE?

Now that we have a better understanding of what this passage is about after studying it in greater depth over the past few days, it is now time to consider how we can apply it into our own lives.

Decision-making for a Christian can sometimes be very easy, when the choices are clear-cut. For example, if we are invited by a friend to go clubbing, we know that under no circumstances should we accept the invitation. If we forget to study for a test and the opportunity presents itself to copy a friend's answers, we should never succumb to this temptation. In these instances, we know clearly that we must never make the choice that would lead us to sin. But the problem comes when it seems that neither choice is in itself wrong. This was the situation that Orpah found herself in. The arguments raised by Naomi to dissuade her daughters-in-law from following her were valid – it was impossible for her to provide them with new husbands to marry, nor was it likely that they would be able to enjoy a good and comfortable life if they were to stay with her. Hence, Orpah made the logical, common, though spiritually undiscerning choice to bid her mother-in-law goodbye and to remain in her homeland.

However, was this the best choice? Perhaps it was, in the world's eyes, but not so in God's eyes. By remaining in Moab, Orpah was also making the choice to return to her false gods (vs 15), rather than to seek after the God of Israel like Ruth had done. A seemingly okay decision turns out to be not that okay after all, when we consider the spiritual implications of it.

Often, we have to make choices that will take time off from doing spiritual activities. Sleep an additional half an hour so you can get more rest, or wake up earlier to do your quiet time? Spend the weekend resting and relaxing after a tough week at school, or spend the time serving God and participating in fellowship activities? Remember, dear teen, that it is not just about not doing things that are outright wrong for a Christian; rather, we should also be actively pursuing the things that are best for us spiritually. May you indeed be “*stedfastly minded*” like Ruth, to pursue only the things of God.

Thought: Obedience is more than just not doing the things we shouldn't; it is also about doing the things we should.

Prayer: Lord, help me to be a doer of Your Word, and not a hearer only.

IS MY COMMITMENT WORLDLY LIKE ORPAH?

All too often, we see people coming to church for the wrong reasons. Even among the teens, there are sadly some who have the wrong motives for coming to church. Some come to find friends or a boyfriend or girlfriend; others come only to have fun and to enjoy the many activities. When these reasons are taken away, therefore, they are no longer interested in attending. For example, if they find that there are other activities out there in the world that are more fun, they would choose to attend those instead.

How about you, dear teen? Why do you come to church? The character of Orpah which we have been learning about is very much similar to these people whom I have just described. She was willing to follow Naomi for as long as her own personal agenda was being satisfied. However, when it came to crunch time where she had to choose, she ended up choosing the path that would satisfy her own desires. Naomi's arguments made sense – it was not possible for her to find another husband and to give birth to more sons for her daughters-in-law to marry. Even if (and it's a very big IF!) she could, it would be absurd for Ruth and Orpah to wait for them to grow up so that they could marry them. Hence, Orpah took Naomi's advice and chose not to follow her back. Her worldly desire (to find another husband to marry) outweighed any desire for spiritual things. She took the path that would help her to satisfy her worldly and physical desires, rather than the path that would lead to spiritual blessings and a knowledge of God.

Are you an Orpah too? Do you find yourself seeking after worldly success, at the expense of your own spiritual walk with God? Have you sacrificed your testimony for the sake of some other worldly pursuit? Dear teen, may you take this chance to reflect on your life today and consider whether you have truly been seeking after God, or whether your commitment has been worldly instead.

Thought: Is my commitment worldly or godly?

Prayer: Lord, forgive me for the times when I have been an Orpah.

AM I SPIRITUALLY COMMITTED LIKE RUTH?

It is extremely heartening to see teens who are wholly committed to God. Especially during the teenage years when peer pressure is so prevalent, it is so good to know of teens who refuse to bow to the pressure to conform to the world, even if it means that they are teased and mocked by those around them.

Ruth is one such person who refused to abandon her spiritual convictions. Though Naomi persuaded her repeatedly to stay in Moab, Ruth's mind was all made up. Even though Orpah had changed her mind and decided to stay, Ruth would not be swayed. The extent of her commitment was nothing short of amazing.

Firstly, she was willing to follow Naomi anywhere, and to stay wherever she stayed. Though this meant that she would no longer be near her own family, she was willing to do it.

Secondly, her commitment was in terms of her heart and spirit. By saying to Naomi that “thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God”, she was effectively renouncing her own race and religion in favour of Naomi's. Truly, how wonderful it is to read of a Gentile girl putting her faith and trust in the LORD Jehovah!

Thirdly, her commitment was permanent, not temporary. She was willing to follow Naomi all the way to the grave – to die where she died, and to be buried where she would be buried. This was no spur-of-the-moment decision, but one that she was absolutely convicted of, and one that would not be changed no matter what. This is why she was able to back her resolution up with a solemn oath in the LORD's name.

Dear teen, do you have such a resolve as Ruth did? Are you serious in your commitment to God? Or can it be easily shaken by worldly influences or peer pressure? May you resolve in your heart today to be fully committed to God.

Thought: Ruth was fully committed to spiritual things – am I?

Prayer: Lord, grant me the grace to be fully committed to You!

HOW DO WE INTERPRET EPISTLES?

Epistles are letters written by the apostles during the New Testament time to specific churches and believers to address certain issues or problems they faced. They are not historical accounts like Genesis or the Gospels but instead contain doctrinal teachings by the apostles as they wrote about the issues and problems faced by different churches.

The structure of an epistle is like a letter with the writer identifying himself and greeting the recipients, followed by the main body of the letter and finally the blessing and farewell. The title and the beginning of the epistles usually reveal who the writer or the recipient is. It is important to identify who the writer and the recipient(s) are and interpret the epistle in the context of that particular church and the problems it was facing. This would involve researching more into the church and the culture it was in, such as understanding the sinful environment surrounding the church of Corinth. Also, as the apostles do not always explain the details of the problems the church is facing, it is important to read the whole epistle through and piece together what the problem is. You may need a Bible survey, atlas or encyclopedia to help you for this.

You may wonder how reading about the problems historical churches faced may help you. You will come to realise that a lot of problems faced by the New Testament churches and believers are problems encountered by believers of all generations. The doctrinal truths taught by the apostles in their epistles stand true now as guidelines for our Christian walk just as they did centuries ago. The epistles are a treasure trove of God’s truths from which we can draw rich applications for our daily lives.

In summary, it is important to think through these questions as you interpret an epistle: Who wrote the letter and to whom? Why he wrote the letter and what issues does he address in this letter? What was the historical context of the church and where was it located? What are the themes and doctrinal truths that the writer elaborates on? What applications can you draw for your own Christian walk? Finally, as always, before you delve into any interpretation of the Bible, it is crucial to pray for the Holy Spirit’s guidance and illumination.

Thought: Can you name some problems faced by NT churches that we also face now?

Prayer: Lord, may Thy Spirit guide me as I study the epistles.

WHO IS THE WRITER OF JUDE?

Often when studying an epistle, we can identify the writer of the epistle by its opening address. However, in some epistles such as Hebrews, the writer does not identify himself so clearly. In the epistle of Jude, the writer states his identity at its opening. He describes himself as *“Jude, the servant of Jesus Christ, and brother of James”*.

Jude, or Judas, was one of the Apostles of Jesus Christ as mentioned in Luke 6:13-16. He was also called Lebbaeus and Thaddaeus as in Matthew 10:3. He must be distinguished from his evil namesake, Judas Iscariot, the Apostle who betrayed Jesus. He instead was faithful to his Lord and his calling as an Apostle. He stated that he is the brother of James as also mentioned in Luke 6:15-16, and both were the sons of Alphaeus. By mentioning his brother, he made it easy for others to know which Jude he was, as the two brothers were known together as Apostles of Christ.

Jude describes himself as *“the servant of Jesus Christ”*. The Greek word for “servant” is *“doulos”* which means a “slave” or a “bondman”. Although he was an Apostle, he did not see himself as a high and mighty religious leader like what the Pharisees did, but instead called himself a slave of his master, the Lord Jesus Christ. Instead of seeking self-glorification, he humbly acknowledged he was but a mere servant and gave the glory to Christ. He knew that because of what Jesus had done on the cross for him, he was eternally bonded to Him and his Master’s work. This self-proclaimed title of “servant of Jesus Christ” not only shows his humility and understanding of his position before Christ but also his focus on labouring for Christ.

We may not be ‘capital-A’ Apostles, but all of us are servants of Christ. We are indebted to our Master for His death on the cross for us. Let us be faithful to Him like Jude and not betray Him like the other Judas. As faithful servants, we must do His work here on earth by propagating the Gospel and bearing a good testimony for Him until we are called home to Him.

Thought: Do you see yourself as a servant of Jesus Christ? What does it mean to be a servant of Christ?

Prayer: Lord, grant me humility and strength to be Thy good servant.

“...them that are sanctified by God the Father, and preserved in Jesus Christ, and called...”

WHO WERE THE RECIPIENTS OF JUDE?

The epistle of Jude is not addressed to any particular church, unlike Romans which is written to the church in Rome or 1 and 2 Corinthians addressed to the church in Corinth. It is considered general or catholic, meaning it pertains to the whole Christian body or Church. Jude addresses it to *“them that are sanctified by God the Father, and preserved in Jesus Christ, and called”*. It was thus written for all believers of Christ and could have been distributed to all the New Testament churches at that time. Jude was addressing issues that he felt all churches would encounter and needed to be warned about.

Jude describes believers as those who have been sanctified by God the Father. Sanctification means “to be set apart” from the rest of the world as God’s holy people. They are to be set apart from the world as described in 2 Corinthians 6:17-18, *“Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, And will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty.”*

Believers are also called, and preserved in Jesus Christ. They are called, in that they cannot come on their own accord but only because the Spirit of God first draws them. They are called out from the rest of the world to be God’s people as predestined from before the beginning of the world (Romans 8:30). Having called them, God preserves them in the faith *“unto his heavenly kingdom”* (2 Timothy 4:18).

If you notice, calling, preservation and sanctification do not involve any active action by the believer. They are all done by God. Truly, our salvation is a work of grace in which we cannot boast to have earned any little part of. This should bring us to our knees in humility and gratitude to God for His work in our lives. It should also cause us to look to God for help in our spiritual walk as He has promised that He will preserve us. It is still called a “walk” as we are to *“make [our] calling and election sure”* (2 Peter 1:10), not to take our salvation for granted but to grow in faith and knowledge of God’s Word, yet all the while leaning on Him to help and guide us.

Thought: What does it mean to be called?

Prayer: Lord, thank You for calling, preserving and sanctifying me.

WHAT WAS THE PURPOSE OF JUDE?

The epistle of Jude reads like a warning letter to the Church. Though it was written directly to the churches during Jude’s time, yet the message in it is timeless, and applies very much to the church today. The writer calls his readers “*beloved*”, showing the love he has for his fellow believers as well as the love that all believers should have for one another. This love comes from “*the common salvation*” which we have in Jesus Christ.

He wrote that initially, he thought to write about this common salvation that we all share, perhaps to encourage the believers to remain strong in the faith. However, the Spirit moved him to consider a more urgent problem that had to be addressed, and that is the proliferation of false prophets and teachers within the churches, and the need for believers to be warned. This was the more pressing issue, and that became the focus of his letter.

Thus Jude’s purpose of writing his epistle was to call on all true believers of Christ to “*earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints*”. This was vital as there were false teachers infiltrating the Church, which Jude would later elaborate on. These false teachers are wolves in sheep’s clothing (Matthew 7:15) and if the Church is not vigilant, she would not even be aware of their presence. In order to be able to spot these false teachers, Jude tells the believers that they need to earnestly contend for the faith. The Greek phrase literally means to “struggle for” and defend the faith. It gives the impression of battling for and protecting the truths of the gospel and the Word of God. This comprises all aspects of the faith, from the original sin in Adam and Eve and its imputation to all man, to the virgin birth of Christ, to Christ’s death and resurrection. This faith was “*once delivered*”, meaning it was given once and for all to all believers. We are to safeguard, teach, remind and defend all aspects of the faith if it is questioned. By doing so, we can guard ourselves against those who attack and cast doubt on God’s Word.

Contending for the faith is an active ongoing process, and the duty of every Christian. We have to know God’s Word well and constantly be on our guard against anyone, even church teachers and leaders, if they say something that goes against the truth of God’s Word. Are you a defender of the faith?

Thought: What are some practical ways that can help you earnestly contend for the faith?

Prayer: Lord, grant me strength and diligence to contend for the faith which Christ’s precious blood gave to us.

WHAT WERE THE PROBLEMS FACED?

Jude goes on to explain why the believers need to contend for the faith. Jude 4 says, *"For there are certain men crept in unawares, who were before of old ordained to this condemnation, ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ."* The danger is very real and near. These men had *"crept in"* to the church. They are enemies of God within God's own barracks! They could be our friends, relatives, contact group members, ministry co-workers, elders or even pastors. Seeing that they could be anyone in the church, believers would do well to first examine themselves to ensure that they do not have the characteristics of these *"ungodly men"*.

The characteristics of these men were that they turned *"the grace of our God into lasciviousness"*. Instead of leading holy lives according to God's will, they abused God's grace and used the excuse that *"grace may abound"* (Rom 6:1), to sin even more. *"Lasciviousness"* means filthiness, wantonness and lustfulness. They promote sins such as homosexuality and fornication, ignoring what the Bible says about how God hates such sin. They are also guilty of *"denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ"*. They probably bear the pretense that they believe in God but deny that He is the only true God. Likewise, they deny that Jesus is the only way to salvation and believe that other religions also can save. They promote ecumenism and believe in uniting with other religions. In this, they have denied Jesus' work on the cross and cannot be called Christians.

Thus they are corrupt in both their morals and their doctrines. They are a great threat to the purity and sanctity of any church!

Imagine what these *"ungodly men"* can do in a church. Slowly, they would promote their beliefs and cast doubt on what the Bible says. If they are leaders or in teaching positions, the damage they can do is even greater, especially if they are teaching the younger children or teenagers. Therefore, we need to always be on the alert. Let us be like the Bereans who *"received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so"* (Acts 17:11). Let us also examine our hearts to make sure we do not have the hearts of such *"ungodly men"*.

Thought: How should you equip yourself to guard against false teachers?

Prayer: Lord, grant me discernment to identify false teachers.

HOW DID JUDE DEVELOP HIS ARGUMENTS?

Jude goes on to elaborate on these “*ungodly men*” by using vivid analogies and examples from the Bible. In each example, he shows how God judges these rebels perfectly, with punishments meted out in accordance to their wrongdoings. In verses 5-6, he likens them to the Israelites in the wilderness who were killed because of their unbelief regarding God’s promises and to the fallen angels who will be judged. These two groups started off seemingly following God, when in actual fact they were never on God’s side. These “*ungodly men*” were also self-proclaimed Christians but their hearts revealed otherwise. They promoted sins like homosexuality and fornication and will be punished as Sodom and Gomorrah were.

They also had no respect for church authority which is given by God alone and would “*despise*” and “*speak evil*” of them (v.8). This is in contrast to Michael the archangel who dared not even accuse the devil when they disputed about the body of Moses but left the judgment to God (v.9). These “*ungodly men*” accuse God’s servants out of ignorance and stupidity and as a result, end up corrupting themselves (v.10).

They have their own self-styled religion, thinking they can come to God on their own terms like Cain (Genesis 4:5). They covet money and riches above speaking God’s truth like Balaam (Numbers 22:7). They cause strife and rebel against authority like how Korah, also known as Core, and his company, did against Moses and Aaron (Numbers 16:1). They speak great swelling words but have no substance or fruit useful to God. Jude likens them to “*clouds without water*”, “*trees whose fruit withereth*”, “*raging waves of the sea, foaming out their own shame*” and “*wandering stars, to whom is reserved the blackness of darkness forever*”. They are “*murmurers, complainers, walking after their own lusts*” and desire the praise of men rather than God’s. The descriptive analogies cited by Jude highlight God’s hatred of these men and their impending judgment.

Thus with all these vivid examples and systematic, irrefutable warnings from the Word of God, Jude highlights the grave dangers that these false teachers present. Reading through this middle section of the book of Jude, the reader is suitably cautioned to take heed, and would certainly pay attention to the next section, as Jude then gives wise godly counsel as to what we must do in response!

Thought: Read through the OT accounts of Cain, Balaam and Korah. Compare them with the “*ungodly men*” in Jude.

Prayer: Lord, protect Thy church from these ungodly men. Help us to identify and speak against them.

WHAT WERE THE APPLICATIONS THAT JUDE MADE?

After reading Jude’s stern warnings against these ungodly men, it is easy to feel disheartened and afraid. However, Jude goes on to encourage the beloved saints in Christ. His loving words to them are a striking contrast to the harsh words to God’s enemies. He exhorts them to persevere in Christ. He calls on them to remember the words of the Apostles and not follow these ungodly men who have “*not the Spirit*”, meaning that these ungodly men are not saved at all yet remain in the church. He encourages them to build up themselves in the faith, pray in the Holy Spirit, keep themselves in the love of God and look to Jesus and His mercy. These are all action verbs that require effort on the part of the believers. They are to actively grow in Christ by reading and hearing His Word, seek Him through prayer, remember Him and look to Him always in all things.

Jude then instructs the believers on how to deal with their brethren who have erred in their doctrine. He recognizes that some may have been led astray by charismatic leaders because of their weak faith or ignorance. These he says to have “*compassion*” on and teach them the truth and correct their errors. Even those who knowingly defy the Word of God are not yet entirely doomed. Jude says that these can be saved “*with fear*”, “*pulling [them] out of the fire*” just in time, by exposing their error and rebuking them. Believers have a part to play in helping one another as we walk the narrow way together. It is our duty to correct in love if another steps out of the right way.

As we read such ‘application’ passages in the epistles, we would do well to take special heed of them, for they are certainly applicable to us as well. Like the Christian during the time of Jude, we too are facing a great falling away in the Church, and find that such ungodly false teachers have infiltrated many churches and Bible colleges all around us. We would do well to be vigilant, to earnestly contend for the faith, and to do all that he exhorts us to do in Jude 17-23!

Thought: What should you do as a teen if your teacher teaches something which you know is against the Word of God?

Prayer: Help me Lord, to keep a close walk with Thee so that I will not be susceptible to wrong doctrines and that I will be vigilant of false teachers.

*“...now unto Him that is able to keep you from falling
and to present you faultless...”*

WHAT ARE SOME THEMES OF THE BOOK OF JUDE?

While studying an epistle, it is good to take a broad overview and identify general themes expressed in it. In Jude, a major theme that covers most of the epistle is that of false teachers. This is a very important theme that is applicable to the church of today as we draw closer and closer to Christ's second coming. In this age of ecumenism and neo-evangelicalism, many will compromise on God's truth for material gain, acceptance, pride, and for self-indulgent sins. As Jude demonstrates with examples from the OT, such men have existed from the beginning of the world and throughout the history of the church. There will always be enemies of God in our midst and we must guard against them.

This leads us to the next theme of Jude which is the Christian as a soldier. Christians are portrayed as soldiers who need to fight against false teachings and guard against anything that defies God's Truth. To do this well, the Christian needs to earnestly contend for the faith! (v. 3)

Another theme of Jude is how the enemies of God will eventually have to face the judgment of God. The fallen angels are *“reserved in everlasting chains”* for the final judgment. The false teachers will be judged when Christ comes again (v.15). Michael the archangel knew that the devil would be judged by God and so did not bring his own judgment on him. We should follow Michael's example and not seek our own vengeance when we know that God will eventually judge our enemies.

Jude ends with a beautiful benediction. It also speaks of another theme in Jude – how God will preserve His children from sin and false doctrine till we stand before Him in His glory. We may have many faults; yet Christ's redeeming blood is able to present us faultless before Him. Therefore, do not lose heart but always turn to Jesus. He alone has the power to carry you through this life.

Drawing out the major themes in epistles can help greatly in our understanding and appreciation of the text. If only we would put in greater effort in our study of God's Word, we would be able to gain so much more!

Thought: Can you come up with any other themes in Jude?

Prayer: Lord, help me as I study Thy Word. Help me to understand it and to grow spiritually from meditating on it.

*“...to the only wise God our Saviour, be glory and majesty,
Dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen...”*

HOW CAN WE OUTLINE THE BOOK OF JUDE?

In studying an epistle, it is a good practice to read through the whole epistle and come up with an outline for it before delving deeper into its contents. The divisions into chapters that we have in our Bibles were not there in the actual letters and so may not represent the best divisions when we consider the context. Therefore, we should form our own headings for each section of the epistle to help us analyse it better.

Jude is a short epistle and thus, is a good example to start with. It can be outlined as such:

1. Salutation and greetings (v.1-2)
2. Purpose of writing the epistle (v.3)
3. Warning of false teachers within the church (v.4)
4. Description of false teachers and how they will be judged (v.5-16)
5. Exhortation and encouragement to the believers (v.17-23)
6. Benediction (v.24-25)

Of course, there is no one single fixed way of outlining an epistle; you may choose to break the sections down in a different way, or you may wish to break the larger sections down into smaller sub-sections. The purpose is to help you better understand and meditate on the Word.

By breaking an epistle into sections, it makes it more manageable to study. You can study each section in detail and see how the writer expands on his main point. When studying the Bible, try to meditate on the words and understand the passage for yourself before turning to commentaries. You always learn more by thinking deeply upon a passage, rather than taking the easy way out by relying on commentaries. Of course, there is nothing wrong with referring to a good commentary to double check your own understanding or if you need help with verses that are more difficult to comprehend. Yet remember that all commentaries, no matter how trustworthy, were written by man and can be fallible. Only God's Word is perfect and always true. By studying God's Word for ourselves, we can better contend for the faith in these last days.

Thought: How would you outline the book of Jude for yourself?

Prayer: Dear Lord, grant me diligence and guidance from Thy Spirit to *“study to shew [myself] approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth”* (2 Timothy 2:15).

HOW DO WE INTERPRET PROPHECY?

Prophecy is a very important part of scripture. By one count, there are 48 prophets and 7 prophetesses in the Bible and about one third of the Bible consists of prophecies. That is a lot. Hence, it will do us well to learn how to interpret prophecy correctly. The principles of interpretation are similar as compared to other forms of scripture. We will apply these principles to the book of Obadiah.

1. Firstly, pray for Holy Spirit's illumination. We are often too eager and rush into the task at hand, forgetting to pray. Prayer, however, is most important, and is something which we cannot afford to neglect. God's Word needs God's illumination and unless He enlightens us, man can never understand His holy Word.
2. The next thing is to understand the context. What was the prophecy for and for whom and pronounced by whom? This is particularly important in the understanding of prophecy, for if we do not know who the prophecy was intended for and why it was given, many things will be vague and confusing to us. This helps us understand better the reason behind why various things are said and the manner in which it has been said.
3. One should read the book at least several times, checking up any difficult words and trying to understand the main gist of the book. After that, create an outline of the book. An outline consists of a breakdown of the book into multi-level parts. This exercise forces one to understand the book better in the process of creating the outline.
4. Look for parallel passages that relate to the passage at hand. This can be found using some Bible helps like the 'Treasury of Scripture Knowledge'. God has provided parallel passages to help us understand Scripture better. Hence we should seek them out.
5. Finally, derive the learning lessons that can be applied to your life. All Scripture contains application, lessons that we should learn for our lives. It is up to us to search them out for our learning, by the grace of God.

We will endeavour to apply these principles to the book of Obadiah in the coming readings. May God help us and give us the grace to interpret His Word correctly for our edification.

Thought: How is studying God's Word different from studying school work?

Prayer: Heavenly Father, help me to understand Your Word.

WHAT IS THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF OBADIAH?

Understanding the historical context in which a book of the Bible was written helps us to appreciate the lives of characters and circumstances in which they lived, and therefore enable us to understand more accurately what is written. However, sometimes it is not possible to be very precise about the historical context of a book because there is little information provided from God’s Word. Still, we can try to make some conclusions while at the same time bearing in mind that we should not be too dogmatic about the certainty of our conclusions.

Obadiah is such a book where very little is known about the author, the period the book was written in, or which period the prophecy referred to. Most Bible scholars believe that Obadiah’s prophecies was set in the period after Jerusalem was conquered by Nebuchadnezzar in 588 B.C. History also tells us that Edom was eventually conquered by Nebuchadnezzar within 5 years from that time, which matches Obadiah’s prophecy which states that Edom would eventually be conquered by a heathen nation (v1-7). Based on verses 11 to 14, we can also conclude that the book may have been written after the conquest of Jerusalem, as the evil deeds against Judah which are listed appear to have already been committed. Hence, Obadiah may have written the book while he himself was in captivity. With this understanding of the context, it is possible that the book of Obadiah was then written for the Jews languishing in captivity and it was meant for their encouragement. Knowing that their God had not forsaken them, but would vindicate them against their enemies and deliver them eventually could be a great source of hope and comfort in times of suffering. God is very merciful, that, despite the fact the Jews deserved their punishment for their hideous trespasses, He continued to give the Jews the promise and hope of deliverance. For us, it speaks of the merciful and loving character of God, and we can take comfort in the promise that He will never forsake us either.

With this historical context in mind, we will have a setting and frame of reference for which the contents of the book of Obadiah is understood to have taken place in. It will certainly make it easier to interpret this book, and we will be able to draw many more precious lessons from our study of it.

Thought: Did the knowledge of the historical context of the book make a difference in your understanding?

Prayer: Lord, help me to be diligent and to search out all I need to know concerning Your precious Word.

WHO WERE THE EDMITES?

There are some facts in the Bible that are not found simply in one place, but in several passages throughout the Bible. By reading Genesis 36, we can understand more about the Edomites. The Edomites are the descendants of Esau, and we know from earlier records in Genesis that he was the son of Isaac and the twin brother of Jacob (Genesis 25:24-26). We also know how Esau lost his birthright to Jacob through unfair means. Hence, Esau hated Jacob. The hatred the Edomites have for the Israelites may have originated from this same hatred. In Gen 36:2, we read that Esau took wives of the Canaanites, who were neighbours of the Israelites, which also helps us understand why the Edomites became a part of the history of Israel, because they were geographically near. Reading the long list of the descendants of Esau, we know that they had become a sizable nation. This fulfills the promise made to Abraham by God, that he would be the father of many nations. (Genesis 17:4). In addition, this is also a fulfillment of the prophecy given to Rebekah when the Lord said in Gen 25:23 that there were two nations in her womb. We also know that Edom, though a weaker nation than Israel, still posed a threat, as history later records how Edom joined forces with the Assyrians to partake in the destruction of Israel. Gen 36:8 tells us that Esau dwelt in Mount Seir, which concurs with Obadiah 1:3 where we are told that the Edomites took pride in living in high places.

Gen 36 helps us understand the Edomites better. Understanding their origins as descendants of Esau helps us understand why the Edomites hate the Israelites so much. Furthermore, we see that God in His mercies did prosper them. They were not neglected and grew as a nation by God's blessings. Hence God's judgment against them was justified because, despite God's goodness, they continued to commit heinous sins against Him and His chosen people.

Interpreting Obadiah better and correctly involves understanding the Edomites better and this is best done by referring to other parts of scripture where the Edomites are mentioned. Reading Gen 36 helps breathe life into our study of Obadiah, as it adds other dimensions to our understanding of the Edomites.

Thought: The only nation that God promised He will preserve is Israel.

Prayer: Lord, help me to have the diligence to study parts of the Bible that I am not so familiar with.

“Every word of God is pure: he is a shield unto them that put their trust in Him.”

WHAT WERE THE EDMITES LIKE?

We can know more about the Edomites by referring to verses within Obadiah itself. Verses 2 to 4 give us more clues as to what they were like. We read first of all that Edom was “*small*”, compared to the other heathen nations. This is true in history. The other neighboring heathen nations were the Assyrians, Chaldeans, Egyptians, Syrians and the Arabs – all big and mighty nations, some of which still exist to this day. Compared to these other nations, the Edomites were a small and insignificant people. Verse 2 also tell us that not only were they small in comparison, they were also “*greatly despised*” among the heathen. This made them vulnerable to attack because of the hatred other nations had for them, which was prophesied to happen in verses 15-19.

Verses 3 and 4 tell us that the Edomites dwelled in the “*clefts of the rock*”. Historians have found such dwelling places which consisted of cave-like dwellings that were carved out of the rock located on mountains and high places. Such dwelling places provided natural defenses for the Edomites. Not only were they protected by the surrounding rock, they were also located on a high place. In ancient warfare, it was difficult and required more effort to attack a place that was located higher up, while on the other hand it was easier for those on a higher plane to ward off attackers that were ascending upwards towards them. Hence, in v3 we read that the Edomites took pride in being located on such an easily defendable fortress. They believed that no one could bring them down. But there was really nothing to be proud about. There was no preventing God’s judgment. It did not matter how formidable their cities or high walls were, or how powerful their armies were. To God, these are all nothing compared to His great power.

They thought that they could sin against God and not fear judgment because their defenses were impregnable. But, we know from history that this was not true because, eventually, they too were conquered and destroyed, never to be heard from again.

Thought: The best defenses are useless without God’s protection. We can only trust in God’s protection.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, may you guard my heart from the dangerous sin of pride.

WHAT IS THE GENERAL GIST OF OBADIAH?

After understanding the background and context of a biblical book, the next thing to do is to get a general idea of what the book is about. This can be achieved by reading it several times from beginning to end. One should try to read as many times as possible. You will discover new lessons each time and with each repeated reading, you will have a stronger grasp of what the book is about. Ideally, a complete reading should be done in one sitting. This helps you remember parts of the book so that you can relate the ideas together and understand the book better.

The theme of Obadiah can be summarized as: God’s judgment on those who harm His chosen people. This can be derived by observing that a certain broad overarching idea in the book of Obadiah. Firstly, you will notice the naming of the sins of Edom in how they prided themselves in the physical protection of the mountains. God hates pride (Prov 8:13). Furthermore, they participated in the cruel destruction of Jerusalem as allies to the Babylonians. Their cruelty and cowardly attacks on Judah were condemned. Finally, their judgment was pronounced. Their evil deeds shall be returned to them. They will be inflicted with the same acts of cruelty that they themselves inflicted on the Israelites. Not only will Zion be finally restored, the same people that they seek to destroy will be the source of their own destruction. In a twist of events, Israel will be called to destroy Edom.

Having a broad idea of a book helps us in our next step of study where we seek to understand the details of smaller sections of the book. Without this broader understanding, interpreting smaller portions of scripture may result in error. This is because we lose sight of the author’s main thrust or idea; hence the importance of first developing this broader idea prior to going into the details. May God help us understand His Word more thoroughly.

Thought: How many times do you think you should reread a book before you are ready to study the details?

Prayer: Heavenly Father, give me the patience and perseverance to study Your Word.

WHAT PARALLEL PASSAGES CAN WE TURN TO?

The best commentary of Scripture is Scripture itself. Because it is all one book, there are portions of Scripture that can help to shed light on other passages, guiding us to a deeper understanding of it. Our reference today in Ps 137 is told from the perspective of the Jewish captives who survived the massacre and were brought over to the land of Babylon as prisoners. It tells of the great sorrow they felt, not just because they were prisoners, but because of the memory of how Zion, their beloved home was lost and destroyed. They had witnessed great atrocities done to their beloved young ones who had their heads dashed against stones (v9). The Psalm describes how they wept by the rivers of Babylon and how they could not sing anymore because of the great sadness that they felt (v 1-3). It also reflects their longing for Jerusalem, the land that had been given to them by God.

There are two enemy nations named in this Psalm: Edom and Babylon. The mention of Babylon is expected because it was the main perpetrator used by God to destroy Judah. It was a mighty conquering nation that was expanding its borders and Jerusalem was among the many others in its path of conquest. However, Edom’s mention alongside Babylon is noteworthy. Though they were not a big nation, their betrayal and cruelty against Judah during Babylon’s conquest was significant in the mind of the Psalmist. He calls upon the Lord to remember their wicked deeds, and prays that they be judged for their sin.

This mention of Edom helps us to better understand the context of God’s prophecy to the Edomites in the book of Obadiah. In Obadiah, there is strong rebuke from the Lord against Edom, and a pronouncement of an impending judgment against them. It alluded to an event that happened whereby they did violence against their brother Jacob in the day where they were invaded and were carried away captive. Not only that, they also rejoiced and spoke proudly against Judah in their day of distress. (Oba 1:10-12). When we compare this with the mention of them in Psalm 137, it helps to give a definitive context as to which event that the prophet is alluding to. In so doing, we compare Scripture with Scripture, and understand the background behind the book a little better.

Thought: Only divinely inspired Scripture can have such perfection and unity.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, may I learn the value of understanding Your Word through seeking out cross-references.

HOW CAN WE OUTLINE THE BOOK OF OBADIAH?

Reducing a book to an outline is important because it allows us to have, in a way, a more simplified view of the book. In so doing, we are able to understand the book more easily because we can now relate parts of it to other parts more clearly. Without an outline, we may not be able to understand how the part we are reading fits into the rest of the book, thus missing out on the meaning intended by the author. The process of reducing Obadiah into an outline can be done first of all by reading it through several times. After this, try to identify the common meaning or purpose within adjacent verses. Group these related verses into sections. Each of these sections can be given a title that forms the first level of the outline. Within each section, read the verses more closely and see if they can be further broken down to form sub-sections. Continue this process until you have completed breaking down the entire book.

Obadiah can be reduced into the following outline:

1. Judgment of Edom is declared. (v1-2)
2. Pride of the Edomites (v3-9)
3. Sins of the Edmoites (v10-14)
4. Judgment on the Edomites (v15-16)
5. Restoration of Zion (v17-21)

By studying the outline, we can see how the Holy Spirit organizes the book. The book is written to comfort the Israelites who were in exile. The book starts off with comfort, by declaring that their enemy, Edom, will be judged. Further comfort can be derived from the naming of the sins of Edom one by one, showing that God was not blind to their sins. The book ends with promise of restoration, and Israel will be given a part in the destruction of their enemy. Truly, we are reminded of Lam 3:32. We have a merciful God who will never give up on us.

Thought: God’s Word always has an order and a logical sequence. Every chapter, every verse, every word, was written exactly as how God intended it to be.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, give me the grace, wisdom and diligence to be able to outline passages correctly.

WHAT IMPACT WOULD THE MESSAGE OF OBADIAH HAVE FOR EDM?

The prophecy of Obadiah was targeted at the Edomites (v1). Although the final outcome of Israel is also spoken of for their encouragement, the purpose was also for the Edomites to know the judgment that would be laid upon them shortly. Hence, we can say that one of the audiences of the book are the Edomites. Knowing this, we then ask ourselves what is the message that is meant for them. At the very start, we read a sobering declaration that the heathen have been moved by God to prepare to attack Edom. If the Edomites believe this prophecy, they should be shaking in fear at this point. Obadiah continues to shatter each of the things they trust the most – their trust in their elevated habitation which will offer no protection, their trust in their allies who will turn against them, and their trust in the wise and strong men of Edom who will be destroyed. After this, Obadiah lists the heinous sins that they committed against God’s chosen people – how they stood as cheering spectators, and did not help to defend Judah when they were attacked despite their relationship as brothers. Furthermore, when Judah was destroyed, they spoke proudly against them. God holds them accountable not just for their actions, but also for the words that they utter. They were also guilty of entering into the land belonging to Israel and stealing their possessions. And perhaps most cruel of all was how they stood in the way of escaping Jews and killed them as they came. The Jews were most vulnerable, yet instead of helping them, they struck them down. Finally, God declares again definite judgment upon them. In the same way that they harmed Israel, they will in turn be struck down themselves.

We know from history that Edom did not repent of their sins and were eventually attacked and conquered, as predicted by Obadiah. Obadiah’s prophecy fell on deaf ears. At the same time, we are encouraged that God will surely avenge His people. We as Christians are His chosen people by adoption. Hence, we know that God will similarly guard us with the same kind of jealousy as He did for the Jews. We are the apple of His eye (Psalm 17:8).

Thought: If your sibling were harmed by another, what would you do?

Prayer: Heavenly Father, help me to remember how You love and care for me and to always have hope.

“...I have loved thee with an everlasting love, ...with lovingkindness have I drawn thee.”

WHAT IMPACT WOULD THE MESSAGE OF OBADIAH HAVE FOR ISRAEL?

The 2nd half of the book of Obadiah relates to the nation of Israel. Although there are still references to the house of Esau (i.e. Edom), the main focus here is on what will happen to Israel. We have to remember that one of the key purposes of the book is to act as a comfort and encouragement to the people of Israel who by now were in captivity. After declaring a series of judgments on Edom, v17 starts with an emphatic “*but*”, drawing the reader’s attention to the contrast that the writer is about to make. God will judge Edom, but, God will do something for Israel that will be different. There will be deliverance upon Mt Zion. While Edom will be destroyed, Zion will be delivered. Zion will be like the fire, while Edom the stubble – and we know how easily stubble burns at the slightest flames. Obadiah continues to declare how the lands of Edom will be completely divided and taken over by foreign forces. V21, the final verse ends with a great word of triumph; mount Zion will be saved and the kingdom of Edom will finally belong to the Lord.

To understand the impact of this message to the Israelites, one must recall what we have learnt so far about the context and background of the book. We remember that those who survived the conquest of Jerusalem and were taken captive, survived with memories of the horrific atrocities they witnessed at the fall of Jerusalem. Their memories would have consisted of the part Edom played as well. This message would have seemed like poetic justice, but there was more to it than just vengeance. The Edomites do indeed deserve their just recompense, but the greater message to the Israelites would be the assurance of God’s deliverance, to remind them that God had not been blind to their plight and had not forsaken them. This message would have been a message of comfort. Although God has chastised his children greatly, yet He will be quick to deliver them and return full measure of judgment to those who have harmed them.

We who are the children of God can learn a lesson here too. As believers, we are adopted into the family of God and are precious to Him. We too enjoy the great sovereign love and protection that was expressed to the nation of Israel. Take heart if you are undergoing trials at this time. God will never forsake you.

Thought: Does God care when we come under attacks from the Evil One?

Prayer: Heavenly Father, help me to trust You more.

"...out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications thefts, false witness, blasphemies"

WHAT SPIRITUAL LESSONS CAN WE DRAW FROM OBADIAH? (I)

There are many lessons we can draw throughout the book of Obadiah even though it is a short book. The focus of the first part of the book is the listing and condemnation of the sins of Edom. Edom was guilty of pride, of trusting in the things of the world instead of God; and of cruelty and betrayal towards Israel their brothers. They were a cowardly bunch. Taking refuge among the Babylonians, they attacked Judah when they were weakest and most vulnerable. Most of us would be aghast at what they have done in verses 1-14. These are sins which most, if not all of us, would not imagine doing. However, what we may not realise is that, in reality, many of us have been guilty of these sins in one form or another. The difference lies only in the conditions wherein we live that did not permit us to put these sins into full practice. In other words, it is by the mercies of God that we are constrained by our circumstances to prevent us from becoming just like the Edomites.

How many of us have been free from pride? How many of us have never put our trust in the things of the world and not trusted God? How many of us have hated our brother or sister when we were angry? Although we have not killed anyone with our anger, but we have nonetheless treaded along that same path that leads eventually to it, if not for the constraining mercies of God. Perhaps we can say that we would never do what the Edomites have done, but in our hearts, we may be no better. We have been guilty of the same sins. Therefore, when we read the first part of Obadiah, it should cause us to be humble. We should recognize that it is only by the mercies of God that we have not become like the Edomites and suffer the same judgment. But left to our own devices, we would have easily slipped into hideous sins of any kind.

May Obadiah be a warning to each of us to remember that we can be no better if we allow sin to fester unrepented. If it were not for the grace of God that worked in our lives, we would still be wallowing in the filth of our sins!

Thought: Sin starts from the heart but eventually becomes an act if not stopped and repented of.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, teach me to recognize how evil my own heart can be and to be humble.

WHAT SPIRITUAL LESSONS CAN WE DRAW FROM OBADIAH? (II)

In the 2nd half of the book of Obadiah, we see a very different tone set. We read of how God will deliver Zion. We read of how God will thoroughly and completely destroy Edom for the sake of His chosen ones. What the Edomites gained through their cruelty shall be returned onto them for their destruction. The same Zion that they sought to destroy will themselves become their destroyer. Looking at how God has controlled and moved events and kingdoms according to His will, we can learn a few things.

As believers, we too are God's chosen ones. As saints, we are precious in His sight (Ps 116:15). Anyone who harms His children harms the apple (pupil) of His eye (Zec 2:8). This fact should encourage and bring us much comfort in times of trial and difficulties. God is powerful and sovereign over all. God is God of both the Heaven and the Earth and has power over everything! No kingdom can prevail against His will. All are at His mercy. He can bring one down and raise another up simply to fulfill His purposes. There is nothing that is too difficult or that works outside of His will. Knowing this, we should not fear any difficult circumstance or enemy. *“The earth is the LORD'S, and the fulness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein.”* (Psalm 24:1). God avenged Israel even though we know that Israel was simply paying for their sins. What they suffered was chastisement for their grievous sins against God. They were given their just recompense; and yet God was merciful to promise deliverance and give them hope. How much more if we as saints of God suffer simply because we were doing His will or answering His call? Even more so, God will stretch out His hand to preserve those who are His and who are faithful. If you have been faithfully serving and following after the Lord, and suffer because of that, you are most precious in His sight. In His time and according to His will, there will be deliverance. If you are His, but you have persisted in sin and suffer chastisement and the just consequences of sin, know that God is merciful and will be certain to restore you if you will return to Him in repentance. However, if you persist in your sin, you should fear God and know that He is also a righteous judge. Just as He has grievously judged Israel and will judge Edom, He can judge you too. Do not persist in sin.

Thought: *“Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling”*

(Psalm 2:11).

Prayer: Heavenly Father, help me to trust You and fear You.

Notes

Notes

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