



Lecture #1, Part 1

Course Information

1. Course Description

Survey of basic New Testament Bible facts to provide a usable foundation for personal study, for ministry, and for other courses in biblical studies and in systematic and practical theology.

A GUIDE TO GOOD BIBLE READING: A Personal Search For Verifiable Truth

Theme: The Bible cannot mean to us what it never meant to those who first read or heard it.

Can we know truth? Where is it found? Can we logically verify it? Is there an ultimate authority? Are there absolutes which can guide our lives, our world? Is there meaning to life? Why are we here? Where are we going?

These questions—questions that all rational people contemplate—have haunted the human intellect since the beginning of time ([Ecclesiastes 1:13–18](#); [Ecclesiastes 3:9–11](#)).

[Ecclesiastes 1:13-18 \(NASB\)](#)

¹³ And I set my mind to seek and explore by wisdom concerning all that has been done under heaven. *It is a grievous task which God has given to the sons of men to be afflicted with.*

¹⁴ I have seen all the works which have been done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and striving after wind.

¹⁵ What is crooked cannot be straightened and what is lacking cannot be counted.

¹⁶ I said to myself, "Behold, I have magnified and increased wisdom more than all who were over Jerusalem before me; and my mind has observed a wealth of wisdom and knowledge."

¹⁷ And I set my mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly; I realized that this also is striving after wind.

¹⁸ Because in much wisdom there is much grief, and increasing knowledge *results in* increasing pain.

[Ecclesiastes 3:9-11 \(NASB\)](#)

⁹ What profit is there to the worker from that in which he toils?

¹⁰ I have seen the task which God has given the sons of men with which to occupy themselves.

¹¹ He has made everything appropriate in its time. He has also set eternity in their heart, yet so that man will not find out the work which God has done from the beginning even to the end.



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I can remember my personal search for an integrating center for my life. I became a believer in Christ as a young adult. As I grew to Christian adulthood (maturity), questions about myself and my world also grew. Simple cultural and religious clichés did not bring meaning to the experiences I read about or encountered. It was a time of confusion, searching, longing, and often a feeling of hopelessness in the face of the insensitive, hard world in which I lived.

Many claimed to have answers to these ultimate questions, but after research and reflection I found that their answers were based upon: **(1) personal philosophies, (2) ancient myths, (3) personal experiences, or (4) psychological projections.** I needed some degree of verification, some evidence, some rationality on which to base my worldview, my integrating center, my reason to live.

These I found in my study of the Bible. I began to search for evidence of its trustworthiness, which I found in:

- (1)** the historical reliability of the Bible from archaeology,
- (2)** the accuracy of the prophecies of the Old Testament,
- (3)** the unity of the Bible message over the sixteen hundred years of its production, and
- (4)** the personal testimonies of people whose lives had been permanently changed by contact with the Bible.

Christianity, as a unified system of faith and belief, has the ability to deal with complex questions of human life. Not only did this provide a rational framework, but the experiential aspect of Biblical faith brought me emotional joy and stability.

I thought that I had found the integrating center for my life—the Bible. It was a heady experience, an emotional release. I can still remember the shock and pain when it began to dawn on me how many different interpretations of this book were advocated, sometimes even within the same churches and schools of thought. Affirming the inspiration and trustworthiness of the Bible was not the end, but only the beginning. How do I verify or reject the varied and conflicting interpretations of the many difficult passages in Scripture by those who were claiming its authority and trustworthiness?

This task became my life's goal and pilgrimage of faith. I knew that my faith in Christ had brought me great peace and joy. My mind longed for some absolutes in the midst of the relativity of my culture and the dogmatism of conflicting religious systems and denominational arrogance. In my search for valid approaches to the interpretation of ancient literature, I was surprised to discover my own historical, cultural, denominational and experiential biases. I had often read the Bible simply to reinforce my own views. I used it as a database to attack others while affirming my own insecurities and inadequacies. How painful this realization was to me!

Although I can never be totally objective, I can become a better reader of the Bible. I can limit my biases by identifying them and acknowledging their presence. I am not yet free of



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them, but I have confronted my own weaknesses. The interpreter is often the worst enemy of good Bible reading!

Therefore, let me list some of the presuppositions I bring to my study of the Bible so that you, the reader, may examine them along with me:

1. **I believe the Bible is the only inspired self-revelation of the one true God.** Therefore, it must be interpreted in light of the intent of the original divine author through a human writer in a specific historical setting.
2. **I believe the Bible was written for the common man—for all men!** God accommodated Himself to speak to us clearly within a historical and cultural context. God does not hide truth—He wants us to understand! Therefore, it must be interpreted in light of its day, not ours. **The Bible cannot mean to us what it never meant to those who first read or heard it.** It is understandable by the average human mind and uses normal human communication forms and techniques.
3. **I believe the Bible has a unified message and purpose.** It does not contradict itself, though it does contain difficult and paradoxical passages. Thus, the best interpreter of the Bible is the Bible itself.
4. **I believe that every passage (excluding prophecies) has one and only one meaning based on the intent of the original, inspired author.** Although we can never be absolutely certain we know the original author's intent, many indicators point in its direction:
 - a. the genre (literary type) chosen to express the message
 - b. the historical setting and/or specific occasion that elicited the writing
 - c. the literary context of the entire book as well as each literary unit
 - d. the textual design (outline) of the literary units as they relate to the whole message
 - e. the specific grammatical features employed to communicate the message
 - f. the words chosen to present the message

The study of each of these areas becomes the object of our study of a passage. Before I explain my methodology for good Bible reading, let me delineate some of the inappropriate methods being used today that have caused so much diversity of interpretation and that consequently should be avoided:

1. Ignoring the literary context of the books of the Bible and using every sentence, clause, or even individual words as statements of truth unrelated to the author's intent or the larger context. This is often called **"proof-texting."**
2. Ignoring the historical setting of the books of the Bible by substituting a supposed historical setting that has little or no support from the text itself.
3. Ignoring the historical setting of the books of the Bible and reading it as the morning hometown newspaper written primarily to modern individual Christians.



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4. Ignoring the historical setting of the books of the Bible by allegorizing the text into a philosophical/theological message totally unrelated to the first hearers and the original author's intent.
5. Ignoring the original message by substituting one's own system of theology, pet doctrine, or contemporary issue unrelated to the original author's purpose and stated message. This phenomenon often follows the initial reading of the Bible as a means of establishing a speaker's authority. This is often referred to as "**reader response**" ("**what-the-text-means-to-me**" interpretation).