I. Introduction to Bible Interpretation

Christians agree that the Bible is the word of God. They believe that God has spoken to us clearly, and that there is only one correct interpretation of any Bible passage. This is the meaning God intended when he breathed his word into the human authors, and the passage was written. A particular passage may have many applications, but it has only one meaning, and that is the meaning the author, through inspiration of the Holy Spirit, intended.

The reason for Bible interpretation is so that we can understand the meaning the original author meant for us to understand. The problem we have understanding this meaning is caused by language, time and culture differences between us and the original audience. Bible interpretation is how we build a bridge between the original author and us.

How then can we determine the proper interpretation of scripture? The science of biblical hermeneutics seeks to provide a method to provide the correct interpretation. Proper hermeneutics will provide us with tools to help us ensure that we are basing our interpretation of the Bible on the truth from the word of God.

Using sound principles Bible interpretation is needed to understand the Bible. The Apostle Paul tells us to be “diligent to present ourselves approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth”. (2 Tim 2:15).

The purpose of these notes is therefore to provide a brief introduction to some basic principles of biblical interpretation.

II. Facts to remember about the Bible.

1. Understanding or interpreting the Bible.
   A. The apostle Peter reminded his readers that some things in the writings of the apostle Paul are hard to understand. (2 Peter: 3:15-16).
   B. There are some passages throughout the Bible which we don’t clearly understand. An example of this would be Genesis 6:2. We don’t know who the sons of God are. Deuteronomy 29:29 and Isaiah 55:8-9 teach us that God does not reveal everything to us and that He thinks differently than we do. Another thing we don’t understand is found in Exodus 28:30 which talks about Urim and Thummim. We see these words several times in the Old Testament and we don’t know exactly what they mean.
   C. The things we don’t understand are not very important. The important teachings from the Bible are easy to understand and they are repeated for emphasis.
      i. Everybody can understand parts of the Bible; this includes unbelievers. However much of the Bible can not be understood by non believers. This is because the Holy Spirit helps us to understand what God’s word means and how to apply it. 1 Corinthians 2:14 In other words we need the help of The Holy Spirit to understand the deeper things of the Bible.
      ii. Repeating this, Unbelievers can not understand most of the Bible because the Holy Spirit is needed for this and only Christians have the Holy Spirit.
2. God inspired the Bible
   A. It is God’s action (2 Tim.3:16) and God’s will that we have the written Bible. Men spoke and wrote the Bible as they were led by the Holy Spirit.
   2 Peter 1: 20-21
   B. Christians believe that the Bible is divine truth, has authority, is without mistakes, and is sufficient for instruction.
   C. The Bible is the very word of God. Yes, men wrote the Bible, and they wrote with their own language and style. But they spoke as they were instructed by the Holy Spirit.
      i. This means they spoke God’s words. What they have to say is not from their own knowledge. They are not the origin of the truth they speak; they are the channel. The truth is God's truth. Their meaning is God's meaning. God speaks His message through the human authors of the Bible.
      ii. Not only is what they wrote from God, but how they wrote was controlled by the Holy Spirit. God did not simply reveal truth to the writers of Scripture and then depart in hopes that they might communicate it accurately. Peter says that in the very communicating of it they were carried by the Holy Spirit. The making of the Bible was not left to human skills of communication; the Holy Spirit himself carried the process to completion.
   2 Peter 1:21
      iii. This does not mean that God dictated every word. Rather his Spirit so invaded the mind of the human writer that the author chose out of his own vocabulary and experiences precisely those words, thoughts and expressions that conveyed God’s message with precision. In this sense the words of the human authors of Scripture can be viewed as the word of God.
      iv. Paul also teaches that all scripture is inspired and good for teaching. 2 Timothy 3:16 All the Bible including the Old Testament is truth from God as men, moved by the Holy Spirit, wrote God’s words.

3. The Bible has no mistakes.
   A. In the original writings there are no errors.
   B. Our present Bibles have a few differences but the meaning of the Bible is preserved. God has protected the message of the Bible, but He didn’t give a perpetual miracle to preserve the manuscript from copyist errors. These errors where the human copyist made mistakes are not important. Look at and compare the following verses:
      2 Samuel 10:18 reports 700 chariots and 1 Chronicles 19:18 reports 7,000.
      2 Kings 24:8 king was 18 years old and 2 Chronicles 36:9 he was 8 years old.
      1 Ki.4:26 and 2 Chronicles 9:25 differ on number of horses.
   C. Good Bible translations: KJV; ESV and NASB are a few of the good translations available. Modern translations such as ESV and NASB are made by going back to the oldest copies of the original language text which still exist, and translating as accurately as they can.
   D. Avoid false translations which seek to teach heretical doctrines such as New World Translation which comes from the Jehovah’s Witness. Beware of it and also the Book of Mormon.
   E. The newest version of the NIV should be avoided because it has changed many of the words from he or him to they or them. You can identify the version to avoid because it is copyrighted. The NIV copyrighted 1984 is good to use.
4. Unity of the Bible: It is composed of 66 books, written by 40 human authors of different backgrounds, education, and at different times over 1600 years but still one book. This is because God is the primary author.

5. Christ is the central message in the whole Bible. The Old Testament looks forward to the coming of Jesus Christ and The New Testament looks back to His coming.

Bible Interpretation includes rules, principles, and methods for interpreting the Bible. It is the process of trying to understand the original meaning of the verses and what it means to us today. The purpose of Bible interpretation is to bridge the time and cultural differences between ancient times and today so that we can understand the original meaning of the Bible and how it applied to us today.

A. So, its purpose is to find the meaning of the author for the people he wrote to and determine the meaning in application for the modern audience. Some of the laws given in the Old Testament are not in effect today such as the laws prohibiting eating pork.

6. The Bible is authoritative.

A. The Bible is from God; all of it is to be obeyed.

II. Why we need Bible Interpretation

1. Interpretation is necessary because we do not live in the times and culture of the writers. The picture is that Bible writers are on one side of a big river and we are on the other side. Bible interpretation is the way we bridge the river so that the original message of the Bible can cross the river to us so that we can understand this original message.

There are some things which the people of Bible times understood, but even using rules of interpretation we still don’t understand the meaning. An example of this is that we don’t understand Urim and Thummim even though the people of Bible times clearly did. We see this phrase several times in the Old Testament. Exodus 28:30 and Numbers 27:21 The things we do not clearly understand are not the important teachings of the Bible.

A. Be careful about believing the person who says he understands every word in the Bible.

III. General methods of interpretation

1. Importance of good observation. Consider Luke 17:21 “ for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you.”

A. Look closely at the passage and ask and answer questions such as:
   i. Who was speaking? Jesus was speaking
   ii. Why was he speaking? He was answering a question.
   iii. What question? When is the kingdom of God coming?
   iv. Who asked the question? The Pharisee
   v. What were the Pharisees? They were a religious group who opposed Jesus.
   vi. Who was Jesus? He was the Son of God, the Messiah. He is the king of the kingdom.

B. Using these questions and sometimes others, we can interpret this verse. We know that these Pharisees were not Christians so we know that the Kingdom was not in them. We know that Jesus is the king of the kingdom so this must mean that the kingdom of God as represented by King Jesus is among them.
C. The correct use of grammar is very important. The Sadducees did not believe in life after death. Jesus said, in Matthew 22:29-32, that He is not the God of the dead. He used one word “is” instead of “was” to prove that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are still alive.

D. Take your time as you read and observe the text. Read it many times.

E. Here is another example for practice: John 5:24 truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes Him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.
   i. What are the important words? They are truly, eternal life, judgment, and death.
   ii. How are these words connected? Jesus uses the word “but” to connect death with life.
   iii. Who is speaking? Jesus is speaking.
   iv. Who is Jesus speaking to? He is speaking to the Jews.
   v. What is the attitude of the audience? The Jews were so hostile that they plan to kill Him.
   vi. What can we observe about the grammar? This means that as soon as a person believes, he has passed into eternal life.

F. The correct interpretation is that Jesus had something very important for the people to hear. He is saying that eternal life is not something you get in the future; it is something you receive now. The importance of this verse is that He was talking about the difference between eternal death and eternal life. He is saying that the believer is forgiven from his sins and will live in Heaven with Jesus forever.

2. Who wrote/spoke the passage and to whom was it addressed? What is the reason for the passage?
   A. It is important to understand the author of a particular passage, his background and the cultural factors that may have influenced his writing. More importantly we need to grasp the author’s purpose and plan in writing a particular book. For example, John, in John 20:31, states his purpose for writing the gospel, “but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the son of God and that by believing you may have life in his name”. John states his purpose clearly in the gospel, but it is not always easy to find the author’s purpose. The following suggestions may help you in finding the author’s purpose and plan.
   B. Note whether the purpose is stated or not. If it is not stated, are there any hints or indications of it? Nowhere does Paul in his letters to the Corinthians clearly state his purpose but we can discover his purpose by comparing 1 Corinthians 1:11, 3:3&4, 4:6,5:6, etc. From these passages we learn that there were serious problems in the church. The people were challenging Paul’s authority and apostleship. Paul wrote to correct the problems. Think like a police detective and look for clues to help understand a passage.
   C. Personal reference to the readers usually indicates the book’s purpose. Themes or subjects that are repeated or emphasized may suggest the authors plan and purpose. Matthew wrote his gospel partly at least to set forth the truth of the kingdom of heaven since he refers to it many times.
   D. Look for the structure of the book. There may be division points such as Chapters.
   E. When the purpose and or plan is clear then study each portion of the book with the purpose in mind being sure that your interpretation agrees with it.
   A good example is Philippians 2:1-8. It shows the purpose of the author. The phrases: the same mind, the same love, full accord shows that Paul was bothered about the
quality of fellowship of the Philippian Christians and so in verses 5-8 he reminds them of Christ’s example. Christ had a certain mind and so he acted in certain ways.

3. What does the passage say in easily understood words?
   A. As you read a text from the bible, it is important to see a text as a communication between the author and yourself of which God is the primary author. It is for this reason that the reader should labor to search for the meaning of the text that the original author intended. Remember there is only one main meaning of the text.
   B. Much of the Bible is easy to understand; don’t make it more complicated than it really is.
   C. Examine words for their original meaning and seek to understand them in today’s world. The task here is to first find out how the original reader understood the words and phrases of the paragraph or text. Then we need to relate the original meaning to something we understand today.
      i. When Paul wrote Colossians for example, it was in the context of the false teaching of the time that he sought to correct. For this reason he used terms which were part of the heretic’s vocabulary but he filled them with new meaning. A good example is Paul’s use of the word mystery in Colossians1:25-26. This was a term that was used by heretical thinkers to refer to the secret things which were known only to the few. Paul uses this word by filling it with a new meaning of God’s plan of salvation that was not known before but is revealed now to everybody through the work of Jesus. The name of Jesus was a mystery in the Old Testament but now we know that it is this name which saves us.

4. Before we can actually establish the meaning of the passage to us, it is important to examine the text and look at the words and phrases to see if the passage applies to us today. Remember not every passage applies to us today such as Leviticus 11:7.
   A. There are some passages or teachings that don’t apply to us today. These are called relatives. For example, the ceremonial laws related to Israel’s worship such as instruction for the tabernacle, priestly duties, and sacrifice rules that don’t apply to us today.
   B. Sometimes the original words are applied to us today in a separate way. An example is where Peter asks the church members to greet one another with a kiss of love. 1 Peter 5:14 Today the message is to greet each other with a friendly handshake.
      i. It is also important to identify words and phrases that apply both to the original audience and to our time with no change. These are called absolutes. Examples of absolutes include, God forbids homosexual acts, Romans 1:27. The sin of homosexual behavior was wrong in Bible times and it is just as wrong today.

      ii. We must be careful to not treat relatives as absolutes because this leads to legalism. An example is that while Jesus did wash his disciple’s feet. We are not required to do this today.
   C. What is the immediate context of the word or passage? Context means how the word is used. Many words, in English, have different meanings depending on how they are used.

5. Drawing conclusions from your reading.
   A. What do I conclude about the passage? What do I understand from what I have just read?
B. What interpretations do others have about the passage? Be careful these other Christians are human and they can make mistakes. Do my conclusions agree or disagree with related areas of scripture and others who have studied the passage?

C. What have I learned and what must I apply to my life?

D. Remember there are no contradictions or errors in the Bible. If you think you have found a contradiction or error search you are the one who is wrong and not the Bible.

6. The importance of context. Often context determines the meaning of a particular word or text. By context we mean the way a word is used.

A. An example is the word running. The child is running to school. President Museveni is running for reelection. We see that the word running has two different meanings depending on its use.

B. Another example we find is in the use of the word asleep in the Bible. It means to sleep in Matthew 28:13. It means dead in 1 Thessalonians 4:14

7. There are two types of contexts we need to consider as we interpret our Bible. These are historical context and literal context/immediate context.

A. Historical Context

Often it is necessary to understand the historical background of a passage to understand what the meaning of a passage is.

i. A good example is the story of the Good Samaritan in the gospel as recorded by Luke 10:25-37. We know that the Jews hated the Samaritans. They hated them because, after the Jews of the Northern Kingdom were removed from their land by the Assyrians, the Samaritans were brought in and given the land formerly belonging to the Jews. When we know this then the story has new meaning for us. This is a lesson about brotherly love which the Bible tells us we should have for our neighbor. Leviticus 19:18 As we read this story, in Luke, we see that the two Jews who are professional religious men ignore the hurt traveler, but the lowly Samaritan, a man despised by the Jews, helped the injured man even beyond what was expected. Who is the one obedient to God here?

Now that we understand the historical context, we can focus on the immediate context. What is the lesson for us today? The lesson for us from the above story is that we are to be good neighbors and help others even if they are from a different tribe.

B. Literal context or what the words say. Context determines the meaning of the word in a passage. We can change the meaning of a word when we take it out of context. A person who wants very strongly to get married can use the following verses out of context to prove he needs to quickly get married.

i. The last part of 1 Corinthians 7:36 says let them get married, or they should get married.

ii. John 13:27 says what you are doing-do quickly

iii. Do not connect these two verses because you want to marry as quickly as you can. These verses have no connection.

C. Pay attention to the surrounding context which means look at the surrounding verses to understand the meaning of the verse you are seeking to understand. For example, some people think family planning is wrong because they read Genesis 1:28 without reading the previous verses.

i. Genesis 1:26-28 Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the
heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth."

God is telling two people that they are to rule over the earth. Clearly they needed other people to help them rule and so God told them to multiply and fill the earth. Clearly today with 7,000,000,000 people on this earth we have obeyed this commandment to fill the earth and family planning is acceptable.

D. Dangers of disregarding the literal context. You can make the Bible say almost anything. This is often used by cults to develop their false teaching.

E. Ignoring the surrounding literal context often results in misinterpreting the verse. Let’s look at two examples:

i. Sometimes people use a verse out of context to prove something the Bible does not say. These people want the Bible to say something and so they misuse scripture.

ii. For example, when people want to prove that the Bible forbids drinking alcohol and they use Luke 1:15 to prove their point. This is clearly wrong because the passage begins in verse 13 and is part of the special instruction the angel of the Lord was giving to the father of John the Baptist. It does not forbid the use of alcohol for anyone else. There are other passages which can be used to teach people to never drink alcohol in our society; a society which has so many alcoholics. Romans 14:13

iii. Some use Luke 10:9 and 19 to prove that we can heal others and that all Christians have other special powers. Actually the entire passage is Luke 10:1-19 which shows us that Jesus gave these special powers to the seventy-two he was sending out. We don’t read that all Christians were given this power.

IV. Factors to consider when interpreting the Bible.

1. The personal situation of the author and how it affects his writing.

The author’s situation often throws light on the meaning of the passage. Many of the writings take new meaning when studied in the light of the situation from which the author wrote.

A. A good example is Psalm 51 which David wrote after committing adultery with Bathsheba followed by the murder of Uriah her husband. David wrote this with a repentant heart and he is freely confessing his sin and asking forgiveness. This chapter teaches us about true repentance.

2. We must understand the history of the Old Testament to understand the New Testament. We can’t begin to understand the book of Hebrews unless we understand the Old Testament.

A. Jesus made many Old Testament historic references to teach a point. Often we can use an Old Testament passage to interpret a passage in the New Testament. For example, Jesus referred to Numbers 21:4-9 when he told Nicodemus, “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the son of man be lifted up” By understanding the Old Testament history, we see a comparison. The Jews were told to look up to God for forgiveness and deliverance just as we look up to Jesus for the forgiveness of our sins.

3. Often sources outside the Bible such as history and geography books are helpful in better understanding a passage. For example the vision of the great image recorded in
Daniel 2:31-45, predicts the rise of and fall of the four empires of Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome. History books can teach us much about these empires and help us better understand the Bible. For example, understanding Roman history helps us understand why tax collectors such as the Apostle Matthew were so despised and hated. It was because they were so corrupt and greedy.

A. Sometimes knowing more about the geography or topography can help you better understand the meaning of a passage. For example Jesus begins the parable of the Good Samaritan with the statement, “a man was going from Jerusalem to Jericho...” (Luke 10:30). We know that this was hilly country where thieves could easily work.

B. Knowing social customs often helps us understand passages such as Ephesians 5:21-6:9, for example you need to know something about Roman household codes in order to really understand the reason for this teaching. These rules were developed to instruct a Christian head of the household how to deal with his family. The social customs at that time told husbands to make their wives submit but they never listed love as a duty of the husbands. Paul, in Ephesians 5:25-31, teaches that the Christian husband has a tremendous duty to protect and love his wife.

C. Economic background is another important area of background study. If we understand how poor ordinary people were in Bible times then we understand that we are to give sacrificially. See 1 Chronicles 29 and 2 Corinthians 8 which tells us that the poor people at the time gave sacrificially which is an example for us.

D. It is helpful to understand the laws of the time. We read in Acts 16:37-39 that Paul as a Roman citizen had certain rights. These laws prevented him from being beaten and it allowed him to appeal to Caesar for trial in Rome.

E. Understanding these things often helps us understand the Bible better. An example of this is found in Psalm 23 which is a great Psalm of comfort for the Christian. We know that the shepherd took good care of his sheep so we see that the Lord takes good care of His people. He guides and directs us. We have nothing to fear because of the total care of the Good Shepherd who is Jesus.

V. Meaning and application

1. Does the author or the writer determine the meaning? Some people feel that the reader is the one who should determine the meaning. However, if you believe that God is the author of the Bible and He wrote it to instruct you then you must read it asking what meaning does God, who is the author, intend for you.

   A. One of the most important principles regarding interpreting the Bible is that we don’t create the meaning. Rather we seek to discover the meaning that has been placed there by the author. Our goal is to discover the meaning God created for us.

   2. We need to define the word’s meaning and application.

   A. Meaning is what the author intended to communicate when he wrote the text. Meaning is determined by the author.

   i. An example is God’s instruction about how to come to Him. We can only come to God through Jesus. This is what the author intended to communicate. John 14:6.

   ii. Some people read this and believe the reader is free to understand the verse the way the reader wants to. Some individuals and denominations give their own desired meaning to John 14:6. The say their God is bigger than this and that God will allow all good moral people into heaven such as the good moral Muslim. This is very wrong.
B. Application is what the person does with the meaning of the passage. What we need to do with the above example from John 14:6 is make sure that we have Jesus as our Lord or we are not going to heaven.

3. Applying the meaning.
   A. You can’t apply the meaning of the Bible unless you know what the Bible means. You can know what the Bible means and not apply it. Knowing what God demands from is useless unless we do what God demands.
      i. A good example is in the area of missions. Matthew 28:18-20 If this command was obeyed more faithfully, then the whole world would be evangelized after two thousand years, but it is not and many people don’t know the truth about Jesus. In the United States there are thousands of well trained seminary graduates who could go all over the world as missionaries but they prefer to stay home and enjoy the good life.

VI. Understanding different sections of the Bible.

   A. There are five useful steps to interpreting the Old Testament. All the steps are not used for each passage.
      i. Step one is determining what the text meant to the original audience.
      ii. What are the differences between the Old Testament audience and us?
      iii. What is the principle of the text?
      iv. Does the New Testament modify the principle? Sometimes such as eating pork.
      v. How do we apply what we read to our lives today?
   B. The law or the Pentateuch.
      i. The law is presented as part of the historical story of Israel.
      ii. The law is presented in a covenant context known as the Mosaic covenant. Exodus 19:24.
      iii. Let us interpret the Mosaic Covenant:
         a. God’s blessings were dependent upon the obedience of the Israelite people.
         b. We are not governed by the Mosaic covenant because it has been replaced by the New Covenant.
         c. New Testament teaching is that while some Old Testament law does not directly govern us today, it contains many rich principles and lessons for living that are still relevant when viewed through New Testament teaching.
         d. As we study the New Testament we see that we are not required to obey the ceremonial laws but the moral laws are still to be obeyed. So we can now eat pork but we must obey the Ten Commandments.
   C. Old Testament Prophecy is sometimes easy to understand and often very difficult to understand.
      i. First we must understand if the author used literal language; this rule applies to all scripture. Read the passage and assume that it is to be taken literally unless it is proven that it should be taken figuratively.
      ii. The way we determine the word or passage is to be taken figuratively is we determine if the word or passage used makes sense if interpreted literally. If it doesn’t, it must be interpreted figuratively. Isaiah 55:12 is a good example. The mountains are not going to sing and the trees are not going to clap their hands. The picture the author wants us to see is one of great rejoicing.
      iii. We must analyze the writings of the prophets to interpret them.
a. Most often the message of the prophet was about the disobedience of the people and the punishment associated with this disobedience. Often there was a call to repent and forgiveness would follow, but sometimes God’s patience was exhausted and punishment was coming.

b. A few of the prophecies were about future times. In our time only about 1% is about prophecy yet to come. Most of the prophecy has been completed.

ii. We must know the historical-cultural context of the time of the author. Who did the prophet preach to?

iii. The basic message of the prophet was a message to the people of the time. The prophet was usually warning them that they were sinning and God would judge them, unless they repent and turn from their sin to God. This is called teaching.

D. Hebrew Poetry—the books of Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs.
A very large part of the Old Testament is written in poetical form so it is essential for Bible interpreters and preachers to know the leading characteristics of Hebrew Poetry. Poetry often has a practice of saying the same thing twice (Parallelism). Parallelism has happily survived without misinterpretation. So it can be put into all languages of the world without loss of beauty or impressiveness.

i. Forms of poetry.
   a. Parallelism is concerned with matching ideas and has several forms see Psalm 3:1-2 for an example.
   b. Synonymous: The ideas presented are similar (Psalm 25:4).
   c. Synthetic: The second thought completes the first thought (Psalm 23:1).
   d. Antithetic: The second thought contrasts with the first (Psalm 1:6).

ii. Poets wrote with an idea of pictures to pop into the reader’s mind by creating visual images which is accomplished by figures of speech.
   a. A metaphor is a figure of speech. It uses words, not literally, but figuratively. It takes a word from its original context, and uses it in another.

   "I beat him with a stick" = literal meaning of 'beat'.

   "I beat him in an argument" = metaphorical meaning of 'beat'.

   We use metaphors to make indirect comparisons, but without using 'like' or 'as'—because that would be a simile. A simile is a direct comparison: "Jane is like a child".

While the Simile gently states that one thing is like or resembles another, the Metaphor boldly and warmly declares that one thing is the other.

While the Simile says "All flesh is like grass" (1 Peter1: 24), the Metaphor carries the figure across at once, and says "All flesh IS grass" (Isaiah 40: 6). This is the distinction between the two.

The Metaphor is, therefore, not so true to fact as the Simile, but is much truer to feeling.

The Simile says "All we like sheep;" while the Metaphor declares that "we are the sheep of His pasture."

b. Hyperbole: deliberate overstatement for the sake of emphasis (Psalm 6:6)
Guidelines for interpreting Hebrew Poetry

Interpret by the use of its context. Pay attention to indicators that help divide the psalm into units of thought. Evaluate the poetic lines that make up each section of thought in order to determine the type of parallelism when parallelism is used.

2. Interpreting the New Testament

A. Parables

A person who tells a good story will never lack an audience. Jesus was a great storyteller, and His stories were meant to impart spiritual information and wisdom. These are called the parables. Approximately 1/3 of Jesus Christ's teachings, as recorded in the gospels, are in the form of parables and Matthew wrote that he used them very often (Matthew 13:34). People remember good stories.

A parable is a true to life short story designed to teach a truth or answer a question. In Jesus’ teaching the parable had an additional purpose. He told us one purpose was to hide the truth from the unresponsive, while making it plain to the responsive. Another way of saying this is the true meaning of a parable is for the church. He does this by using a common everyday story of life that can be easily understood.

Parables revolve around one main point of comparison between the activity in the story and Jesus’ understanding of the Kingdom of God and so they teach one primary lesson.

Here are four steps to understanding parables.

1. Begin with the immediate context. What is the main point of the story?
   A. Luke 15 We know as the story of the prodigal son. What is the main point of the story? Jesus told this story to point out the difference between the unforgiving older son and the forgiving father who represents Jesus.
   B. Sometimes the meaning of the parable is given in application such as Matthew 24:44. Here the meaning is that we must be prepared for the fact that Jesus might come back at any instant.

2. Identify irrelevant details. The parable in Luke 17:7-10 has many parts that are not important to the truth being taught. The part that is important is that we do not deserve credit for doing what is right.

3. Identify the relevant details.
   A. The father running out to meet his son in the story of the prodigal son is a relevant detail. His running out showed his heart; that he was eagerly waiting for his son. This is the relevant detail.

   A. Usually a parable is intended to teach only one important lesson.
   B. Sometimes the lesson may be discovered in the introduction to the parable e.g. Luke 18:1-8
   C. Sometimes the object of the parable is revealed only at the end of the parable see Luke 15:3-10.
D. Never attach meaning to all the details that fill out the parable story. This is because one might be inventing meanings for the story that the Storyteller himself never intended.
E. We must not seek to establish any doctrine solely upon the basis of a parable. Do not take some details of a parable and make this the foundation of an important teaching. A parable may contribute to doctrine but all doctrines must come from literal passages. For example Mathew 25, which is the story about the five foolish virgins, does not teach any doctrine. It teaches that we must be prepared at all times for Christ to return. The doctrine teaching this we find in literal passages in other parts of the Bible such as Acts 1:11, John 14:3, Revelations 1:7.

VII. Summary of our study

1. Most of the Bible and all the main teachings are to be read and understood just as they are written. The main teachings are very clear and are repeated so that we will not fail to get the message.

2. Use logic to understand some passages.
   A. The different steps of text analysis follow one another with each step building upon the findings of the previous one until the message of the paragraph is finally established in this step. They are progressive in the sense that each one in turn leads you nearer to establishing the meaning of the passage. To draw the conclusion of the passage the reader is expected to use all the techniques we have previously discussed.
   i. Let’s take Colossians 1:21-23 as our example for which the steps have been identified as follows.
      The Colossians are lost because of sin
      They are saved because of Christ’s death
      God views them as morally pure because of Christ’s work.

3. Do my interpretations agree with other Scripture? Your interpretation must agree with other Scripture because Scripture never disagrees with other Scripture. Use Scripture to interpret Scripture. There is a harmony of Scripture. **Whenever the reader draws a conclusion that the Bible is self contradictory, the problem is not with the Bible but the reader himself.** Use similar passages to help understand what you are trying to interpret.

4. Does your interpretation agree with other people’s interpretation? People can make errors, but you should look at what other people think a passage means before you decide they are wrong and you are right. It is good to hear the opinion of mature Christians to help when there are disagreements.

5. Read the Bible being prepared to learn and to change your mind. Do not approach the text with the idea that you know what it means and you are not going to be influenced by the Bible.
   A. An example is that some people believe that if a person attends a certain church he is automatically going to Hell and can’t go to Heaven. They disregard the fact that Jesus judges each person individually and not as a group.
B. Jesus totally condemns the church in Sardis in Revelation 3. Yet in verses 4-5 He says there are a few of His people in the church. This means that there can be Christians from any church. Yet people who don’t want to believe this ignore these Bible verses.

6. The best help you can get to interpret the Bible is from the Holy Spirit. Pray that God will help you. Years ago when, a man named, Bob first started teaching the Bible, Bob was teaching through the book of Isaiah. Often Bob could not understand a passage and Bob would be ready to give up. Bob would cry out to God for help and soon new understanding would come to him. 1 Corinthians 2:14

7. Chapter numbers and verse numbers are not part of the original writings of the Bible. Humans later added these to make it easier to find different places in the Bible. Sometimes a passage goes from the last verses of a chapter over into the next chapter. Don’t allow the placement of a chapter or verse influence your understanding of the passage.

8. Do not build a doctrine based on one verse. Doctrines, such as salvation by faith and not by works, are taught throughout the Bible. See John 3:27; 6:52-65; Philippians 1:29; Acts 16:14; Acts 18:27; Ephesians 2:8-10, and others.

A. Often people misuse one verse to justify doing what they want to do. For example:

i. Matthew 19:12 is used by some churches to teach that church pastors should not marry. This is not a correct interpretation of the Bible.

ii. Various groups have misused Genesis 9:20-27 to justify making black people slaves and also this was used in South Africa to justify apartheid; Some people say the mark put on Canaan was black skin, and this is clearly wrong.

VIII. A final thought about interpreting the Bible concerns the help of God Himself. Pray and ask God to help you understand the meaning of a passage. As you struggle trying to understand the meaning, often the meaning remains hidden. You must really try with all your effort to understand what God is saying. If you just can’t understand then stop and pray and ask The Holy Spirit to help you understand the meaning and often God will help you.