

Bible Instructions: An Owner's Manual for the Word of God **By Greg Johnson**

A 29-Point Guide to Reading the Bible

There are certain basic principles that guide all verbal communication. God, in giving us the Bible, has stooped down to our level to communicate His message to us in written form. God does not reveal His will to us through our emotions, but through a book written down by the hands of men. As a result, we must be careful to read the Bible as we would any other book-- we have to read it with certain principles in mind. Of course, the Bible is not merely a human book; it is God's revelation to us, so we must submit to the Bible in a way we submit to no other book. The Bible must be given the role of correcting our beliefs, attitudes, emotions and actions. We must have the proper attitude before the text.

1. We are required to study the Scriptures.

But beyond this, we are given the privilege of receiving the message that God repairs our sin-ravaged souls. Those in darkness need a lamp at their feet. Bible study is both a duty and a privilege. Deuteronomy 29:29; Psalm 119.

2. To misinterpret a Biblical passage is sin.

It is wrong to misrepresent anyone, but especially God. As R.C. Sproul has said: More often than not, when we misinterpret the Bible, it is not because God has failed to do His work, but because we have failed to do ours.

Note from David Feddes: I think Greg Johnson overstates this point. I do not think that we sin every time we misunderstand a Bible passage; we might just be making a mistake because we lacked the information or ability to understand the passage fully and correctly. Not every mistake is a sin. Still, many misinterpretations are sinful. Some errors may be due to laziness in refusing to study hard, or due to stubbornness in clinging to our own ideas rather than being open to what the Bible passage actually teaches, or due to some other sinful attitude.

3. We must accept that only the Spirit of God knows the things of God.

We cannot expect to have a satisfactory understand the Scriptures unless we have the Spirit-- unless we are truly Christian. This is why I'm extra-cautious when taking a class or reading a biblical commentary written by an unbeliever.

4. We must be prepared to submit to and obey the Scripture.

Whatever it requires, we must be in submission to God's word if we are to interpret it correctly. Have you ever changed your behavior in an area simply because the Scripture commanded it? If not, you have some soul-searching to do before God.

5. We must not approach the Bible in an individualistic manner. Ask for help.

God has gifted some Christians with gifts of knowledge, wisdom and teaching to

degrees that He has not given to all. God's people read the Scripture together-- do not think you can understand every biblical text alone. Do not despise any spiritual gift. Self-sufficiency before the text is arrogance before God.

6. We may not speculate beyond what the Scriptures teach.

What God has given is enough for us. Don't make up stuff, even if it sounds neat or makes sense to you. Our speculations must be subservient to the text of Scripture. Deuteronomy 29:29.

7. We must interpret every biblical passage in light of the whole of Scripture.

An interpretation of one biblical passage must "fit" with other passages, and with the overall teachings elsewhere in the Bible. God does not contradict Himself. We can never "pit" one biblical text against another.

8. Always interpret unclear passages in light of clearer passages.

But be prepared to accept the possibility of having misinterpreted previous passages.

9. Don't pretend to be "neutral."

We all have firmly held beliefs which we bring to the Scripture. Be open about what you believe, and be prepared to change what you believe if Scripture requires.

10. Don't jump off into the mystical deep end.

There is nothing "spiritual" about finding secret, hidden or mystical meanings in biblical texts when they're not really there. Remember, to misinterpret a biblical passage dishonors God. He has spoken to us in human language, so we understand his word by studying its human language--in a sense, like we study any other book.

11. No "lucky-dipping."

This is when you pray, "God tell me what decision I should make," and then blindly drop your finger on a page of the Bible to find out what the answer is. God does not lead us in this manner. Lucky-dipping is an occult form of divination that seeks to manipulate God into telling us what he has not told us. The Lord does not want us to by-pass our God-given decision-making abilities. God wants us to value what he values, be willing to do whatever he teaches, and discern (with the help of elders) how we can best glorify God.

12. There is ultimately only one correct interpretation.

Two contradictory interpretations cannot both be right. When two people in a small group have contradicting interpretations of a passage, at least one of them must be wrong, even if that sounds intolerant. We have to be concerned with truth. The only proper meaning of a passage is the meaning given to it by God, communicated to us through intelligible human language.

13. Remember to read the Bible as a needy sinner, not as a self-righteous legalist.

We're not to ask the text, "What do I have to do to make God like me today." Jesus rejected the Pharisees because they searched the Scriptures, thinking that by them they

could gain eternal life. Eternal life is free from Jesus for those who know they're failures and want peace with God. When we open the Bible, we need to ask "How can God's grace change me?" "How can I live in Christ's life?"

The Bible's Main Purpose: Redemption

It is easy to miss the main point the Scriptures teach us, even though we study them carefully. In John 5:39, Jesus rebuked the biblical scholars of His day because they missed the very center of God's communication in His Word. "You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about Me." Christ the Redeemer is the center of the biblical message. The Bible is not merely a rule book, telling us how we may fix ourselves. We are fallen, broken people, completely unable and incompetent on our own. Christ must save us. Christ must enable us to live the Christian life. Christ, who has brought us safe thus far, must also take us home.

Three Questions to ask of every biblical text:

1. What does this text tell me about my need for grace?
2. What does this text tell me about the God of grace?
3. How does this text tell me to respond in faith to God's grace?

14. We must seek God's help in applying the biblical text to our lives.

This is often difficult. The biblical books were written to different people thousands of years ago-- how can we apply them directly to ourselves? I've heard it said, "Reading the Bible is like reading the mail of people who died 2,000 years ago." I just can't remember the last time I was tempted to eat meat sacrificed to idols-- and it's been years since I last offered children to Molech in the fire. Bryan Chapell proposes looking at the text's "Fallen Condition Focus" as a key to properly applying a passage to ourselves.

Fundamentally, the question is this: What do Christians at the twilight of the twentieth century have in common with ancient Israelites or first century Greeks? The answer: sin. Sin has infected every corner of our lives, leaving us hopeless and impudent, desperately needing a gracious God to restore us. This is our Fallen Condition, the state we find ourselves in, whereby we need Christ's redemptive work (his help)-- not just His forgiveness, but the ability to obey as well.

To bridge the gap and apply the Scriptures,

- FIRST: look for the Fallen Condition Focus in the biblical text. What problem was the Scripture originally addressing in its own historical context? Fear? Immorality? Lack of knowledge? Lack of hope? Lack of faith?
- NEXT: look for how you and other Christians share in that same Fallen Condition. What do you have in common with those in the text?
- THEN: ask the text, "How does God provide the grace and love (whether encouraging or disciplinary love) necessary for His people then and now?"

15. Apply the Scriptures according to their biblical emphasis.

Do not make one element in the Christian life dominant, and do not neglect another aspect of Scriptural teaching. You may be asking for God's help with the same one bad habit again and again when he's trying to work on some other area of your character. Don't become sidetracked onto one concern.

16. Take into account cultural differences.

Give me a holy handshake or a heavenly hug, not a holy kiss. Kissing in the ancient world meant something different than what kissing means now. Sorry, Harry, I'll offer you my hand instead. Still, be warned: a lot of people misuse this "cultural" principle. Whatever they don't like is just "cultural" and not for us today. This is a sure sign of unbelief. Care is needed here, as well as a real heart-submission to the text. Still, even though the principle is often abused, there really are some instances where the application of biblical principles plays out differently in our culture than it did in Jesus' day.

17. Read a passage in light of its Genre.

There are many different kinds (or "genres") of literature in the Bible. And each different kind of literature has special rules to follow in interpreting it. When we pick up a children's storybook, we assume different rules of interpretation than when we look at a lab write-up or a law book or a first-hand account of a battle. Is this to be taken as historical fact? Probably not with the storybook. Is this a morally binding command? Probably not with the lab write-up. To interpret a passage correctly, we must know what kind of literature, what genre, we are seeking to understand. There are a lot of specifics that could be mentioned, but here are just a few characteristics of seven biblical genres (adapted from Dan McCartney and Charles Clayton, *Let the Reader Understand*, 1994. p.210-228.):

A Short Guide to Biblical Genres

A. Theological History:

Most of Genesis through Esther, the Gospels and Acts are theological history. Theological history is just that: both history and theology. It seeks to give an accurate account of events, just like with modern history, but also seeks to interpret those events from God's perspective. Ask:
How has God worked out His purpose with His people in the past?
How has this action established a people for God in the past?
How should we, as God's people today, trust and obey this same God?

B. Law:

The law reveals what God requires of His people. Not simply "commands," the law is more fully understood as God's instruction for His covenant people-- the law does not come against us as our enemy, but rather leads us to Christ and guides us in grateful living in obedience to Christ. In the Old Testament, we must distinguish universal commands, as found in the Ten Commandments ("Do not murder.") from case laws, which show how those universal commands applied to

specific situations ("If..., then..."). Further, in this new covenant era, we must distinguish between three aspects of the Mosaic Law:

- *The Moral Law*: This is an expression of God's character, the universal moral norm for all people everywhere forever.
- *The Ceremonial Law*: These regulated the religious ceremonies of ancient Israel, such as the sacrifices, which have been fulfilled now in Christ. The Ceremonial aspect of the Mosaic law has now expired.
- *The Judicial Law*: These were the administrative laws of the state of Israel before Christ came. As no state is now in covenant with God, these too have expired (See Mt. 19:7-9 regarding divorce, for example.)

C. Poetry:

Poetry in the Old Testament is distinguished, not so much by rhyme or meter, but by parallelism. A parallel consists of two or more lines of roughly the same length (in Hebrew) which address the same topic. Look out for how the second line in the parallel advances or alters the thought of the first. See the Psalms.

D. Prophecy:

Most biblical prophecy is not concerned to foretell future events (though prophets did this). Most prophecy is concerned simply to bring God's message to His people-- the condemnation of sin, the warning of coming judgment and the call to repentance are common themes. It was as more forth-telling than fore-telling. Often when long-range predictions were given, they were fulfilled in more symbolic ways than many suppose, and often were not fulfilled all at once.

E. Parables:

Parables, used most by Jesus Himself, are stories which illustrate spiritual truth. Jesus used parables as much to conceal as to reveal (Mt. 13:12-15). Parables often have one point for each major character, though sometimes they make only one simple point. The key to understanding many parables is to look for an unusual detail in the story, for that detail (like a really big mustard tree) often reveals the meaning (the kingdom of God starts out small but gets really big).

F. Epistles:

Most of the New Testament is composed of epistles, or letters. One common problem is that epistles were written to specific people with specific circumstances. The interpretation of certain passages will thus depend on how one understands the historical situation the letter addressed. This urges us to be cautious-- it is easy to "import" a foreign situation into the text so as to yield a desired (and false) meaning. Most passages, however, are not situation-specific.

G. Apocalyptic:

Revelation and portions of Daniel are apocalyptic. Apocalyptic literature describes earthly events from God's perspective, as part of the heavenly struggle between God and the forces of evil. Apocalyptic literature assures us that God will gain

victory in the end through His Messiah (Dan. 7:13-14; Rev. 1:12-18). Such literature is highly symbolic, and such symbols must be interpreted in light of what the first readers would have understood (often in light of Old Testament imagery). Another characteristic of apocalyptic is dualism between good and evil, holy and profane, the true God and Satan, the pretender.

18. Analyze large sections of the Bible, not just words & sentences.

Imagine a Christian man is facing severe trial. Suffering has shown its face at his door, and his world would seem to be crumbling. In desperation, he cries out to God, "Lord, show me what I should do!" The man closes his eyes, opens his Bible, lets his finger drop and... what is God's word for him today? "So Judas threw the money into the temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself." What went wrong?

The problem was a failure to study the passage (Matthew 27) as a whole, focusing in on just one verse instead. (Of course, the man erred also in bringing his own question to that text, rather than allowing the text to pose its own questions.) Context is key. Even among those who do show concern for a text's context, Bible study too often gets bogged down in concern over the precise meaning of particular words, or becomes a mere listing off of verses without grasping the overall argument.

It may come as a surprise to learn that words mean nothing by themselves. A word can have any number of meanings. We may speak of being "saved by the bell," or we may speak of saving chairs or of "getting saved." What does the verb "to save" actually mean? Not much, unless there is someone doing the saving, someone or something being saved, and a larger argument from which we can determine which meaning of "to save" is being used. The study of a larger discourse, not merely the study of individual words, is vital to properly interpret a biblical passage. (I just saved this on my computer.)

Dan Doriani suggests "thinking in paragraphs" as one way in which to analyze a larger discourse:

- **FIRST:** Start by reading through a chapter (more or less) two or three times, making mental or written notes on its chief ideas.
- **NEXT:** Try to capture the essential thought of each paragraph in a single sentence.
- **THEN:** As you work on this, keep an eye on preceding and following paragraphs. They will help you remember where you are on the 'ladder of ideas.'

Example: Discourse Analysis of Romans 5:1-5

Analyzing a large discourse (studying a longer section) works best in the epistles (letters), where a single argument is being made in any given passage. A formal discourse analysis will look at the relationship between the various phrases in a discourse so as to trace the flow of thought. How does this statement relate to the

previous one? And where does it fit within the overall argument the author is presenting? For Romans 5, this might look like this:

v.1 since we have been justified	ground for what follows
we have peace with God	consequence #1
through Jesus Christ	means of peace
v.2 through whom we have access to grace	consequence #2
in which we now stand	specification of grace #1
and we rejoice	specification of grace #2
v.3 rejoice in sufferings	consequence #3
because suffering produces perseverance	reason
v.4 perseverance, character	further reason
character, hope	even further reason
v.5 hope does not disappoint	final cumulative reason
because God has poured out his love	reason for reasons
by the Holy Spirit	means of love

Romans 5 in a bigger context:

Looking at the entire letter to the Romans, we can see Romans 5 as part of an even larger argument in Romans 1-8:

- Romans 1:1-15 Introduction: God's gospel
- Romans 1:16-17 THEME: "For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed."
- Romans 1:18-3:20 The need for righteousness from God
- Romans 3:21-31 Righteousness received by faith alone now
- Romans 4:1-25 Righteousness by faith alone in the Old Testament
- Romans 5:1-21 RESULT #1: Peace with God
- Romans 6:1-23 RESULT #2: Righteous behavior
- Romans 7:1-25 RESULT #3: Freedom from condemnation of law
- Romans 8:1-39 RESULT #4: The indwelling Spirit as assurance

19. Understand that the Bible makes use of some common literary devices.

The biblical authors have used a great many literary devices in composing the Scriptural record. It is simplistic to think that we can just take the "plain and simple sense" of any passage. Was Jesus speaking literally when He said, "I am the door?" Does the Messiah have a door knob? Obviously not. We immediately realize that such sayings are figurative. Jesus was using metaphor; He is like a door in that all must go through Him. Here are a number of literary devices to watch for:

Common Literary Devices in the Bible.

- *metaphor & simile*: a figurative comparison between two things, such as Ps. 18:2, "The LORD is my rock," or Lk. 13:32, "Go tell that fox (Herod)...." Fox in the first century meant "crook" (not "sly"). Herod was not really a big, hairy animal that howled--he was really human.

- *synecdoche*: representing the whole by a part, or vice versa. Judges 12:7, "Then Jephthah the Gileadite died and was buried in the cities of Gilead." Jephthah was not dismembered. He was buried in only one city, but "cities" stands for the one.
- *metonymy*: substituting one word for another, as in "The White House issued a statement today." The house itself didn't talk, the President's press secretary actually issued the statement. Similarly, Paul uses "the circumcision" to refer to the Jewish people (the medical practice wasn't causing problems in Paul's day, the Jews were).
- *hyperbole*: rhetorical overstatement, as in 1 Kings 10:27, "The king made silver as common in Jerusalem as stones...." Jesus also used this device when he said that if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off, and if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. The point he was driving home was that we need to radically amputate the sin in our lives. He doesn't want us to mutilate our bodies, though. Blind men can still lust. Handless men can still covet.
- *irony*: the use of words in which the intended meaning is the opposite of the expression, as in Michal's words to David in 2 Samuel 6:20, "How the King of Israel has distinguished himself today, disrobing in the sight of the slave girls of his servants as any vulgar fellow would!"
- *ellipsis*: shortening a phrase without shortening the meaning. In 2 Cor. 5:21, "sin" for "sin offering." Jesus was not actually sin.
- *anthropomorphism*: describing God in human terms, as in John 10:29, "no one can snatch them out of My Father's hand." The Father has no hand, but is a spirit (John 4:24), invisible (Col. 1:15).
- *personification*: giving human qualities to inanimate objects, as in Ps. 24:7, "Lift up your heads, O you gates." Even if the gates actually had heads, they could never lift them up on their own.

20. Watch out for illogical leaps.

Try to find each illogical step in this paragraph:

Why Are Fire Engines Red? They have four wheels and eight men; four plus eight is twelve; twelve inches makes a ruler; a ruler is Queen Elizabeth; Queen Elizabeth sails the seven seas; the seven seas have fish; the fish have fins; the Finns hate the Russians; the Russians are red; fire engines are always rushin'; so they're red.

The next few points will look at some of these wrong ways ("fallacies") of reading the Bible.

21. Avoid the Root Fallacy.

This is the mistake of defining a word with its etymology--the original meaning the word had centuries earlier. A word used in 100 AD may not have the same meaning it had in 300 BC. The English word "nice," for example, comes from the Latin *nescius*, which means "ignorant." Words change meanings over time. When your mother says you're nice, she doesn't mean that you're ignorant.

22. Don't trip over the Totality Transfer.

This is the mistake of pouring all the meanings of a particular word into every use. Often a concordance will list several meanings of a word, just like a dictionary may have several definitions of a word. These are only the possible meanings. The error may sound like this: "We see here in Strong's Concordance that flesh means the body and the sin nature. The body, according to the word flesh, is the fundamental core of sin." Only one of those definitions is correct in any one instance. "Green" for example can mean either the color green or envious. If a guy says his friend who failed the test he aced is green, he does not mean both that he is envious and colorful--just that he is envious. Watch out for totality transfer.

23. Don't argue from a text's silence on an issue.

This is the mistake of assuming that silence on a given topic necessarily has theological significance. "If Paul had believed in Hell, he certainly would have taught it in Philipians" Really? Why? His silence in Philipians means nothing.

24. Negative Inferences can be misleading.

This mistake assumes that negative inferences from a true statement are also true. "All Mormons own a Bible. Jessica is not a Mormon. Therefore Jessica does not own a Bible." The problem? Such a statement may or may not be true.

25. Don't fail to distinguish between apples and oranges.

This mistake assumes that because two things are alike in some respects, they must be alike in all respects. "Since in Christ there is neither male nor female, women can be ordained as elders." Wrong. When Paul says this in Galatians, he is discussing our equality as equally united to Christ in salvation. He is not discussing whether equal men and women always have the same roles to play in God's design. Equality and interchangeability are different categories.

26. Be on the lookout for the Excluded Middle.

Sometimes people will set two (and only two) options before you when in fact there are more than two possibilities. This is an error I come across all the time, even from the sharpest of people. This mistake sets up a false either-or dilemma, when other options are present. Like this: "What matters about Adam and Eve is not whether they ever actually existed, but the theological significance of their story." Oh really? I agree that the theological significance matters. But I also realize that it matters because it is true--it actually happened. Make-believe fairy tales are not theologically significant because they aren't real. Both--fact and theological significance--matter. This is the third option that wasn't mentioned. Watch out for people who say, "Which is it--this or that?" Ask yourself whether a third (or fourth) option exists.

27. Don't assume that a biblical term has a technical meaning unless you know otherwise.

Sometimes phrases have technical meanings, sometimes they don't. If I'm watching a football game, and someone mentions a "super bowl," I assume their talking about a

national football championship game. This use of "super bowl" has a technical meaning. However, if I'm in the crystal section of Dillard's department store, and someone says, "Look at that super bowl," I assume that super bowl doesn't have a technical meaning. Many Word-Faith prosperity preachers on television read the phrase "word of faith" in Rom. 10 as a technical term for "naming it and claiming it," wrongly justifying their gospel of greed. "Son of man" is another example. In some Old Testament texts, it simply means a "human being"--as opposed to a son of a sheep, which would be a baby sheep. Elsewhere in the Old Testament, "Son of man" refers to the coming Messiah who (though divine) would come to Israel as a human being.

28. Remember: The Bible is ultimately not a book about humans and their religion, but about God and his eternal purpose.

The Bible's message is not that the Israelites sought God, but that God sought the Israelites. It is not all about us coming to Christ, but about Christ coming to us and saving us. The focus is on God and his greatness, faithfulness and mercy, not on us and our faithfulness. All the glory goes to God, not to us. Whether written in or not, God is the chief actor on every page of the Bible.

29. A final reminder: Enjoy reading the Bible.

This won't always be easy. Your sinful nature will try to make it a chore. It's not. (Funny, my sin nature never complains about my wasting hours watching TV, but ten minutes in the Bible can raise the fiercest objections from my sin!) You have been given a wonderful love-letter from God. Read it, love it, hide it in your heart, and tell everyone else about it!