

# **Understanding the Bible**

*- for ordinary  
Christians*

**Jacob Ninan**

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*Dedicated to*

All those who love the Lord Jesus Christ  
and who want to know more of His word

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

The Bible is God's gift to us. If we want to know God—who He is, what His character is like, what He likes and dislikes, how He deals with us people, what His plans for us are, what He wants us to do, what He wants to tell us in the different situations of life to comfort, encourage, challenge, guide or teach us—this is what we need to read. When all other religions of the world are based on man's own conjectures about God, here is what God Himself has revealed to us.

For many centuries after the Bible was completed, it was monopolised by the priestly class, and ordinary people had to depend on whatever interpretation was handed down to them. But now that the Bible is available in most languages so that ordinary people can read it for themselves, many people are making

mistakes in understanding it due to a lack of knowledge about how to interpret it in the right way. So much is packed into this book, that unless we learn how to unpack each truth in the right way (the Bible refers to this as ‘rightly dividing the word of God’), we can make mistakes. Sometimes these mistakes can be very costly, as when someone follows a wrong way for his salvation, or a father *assumes* God is going to heal his child without any medicine, based on his understanding of the Bible, and finds out too late that he was mistaken. We don’t need to be great Bible scholars with knowledge of Greek and Hebrew (though that would be helpful in its own way), in order to understand what we need for common life. But we do need to understand some rules and guidelines about interpretation without which we can go wrong very easily. These rules are not difficult to understand, and in this book I am going to keep things simple. Those who want to be involved

in Bible translations or deeper theological issues would find it necessary to master the subject of Biblical hermeneutics (the technical term for interpreting the meaning), among other things. But this book is especially for ordinary Christians (and not for Bible scholars), who want to understand the Bible and learn to use it in their practical life.

What I would be doing is to go through the major guidelines for understanding the Bible along with some examples where people commonly make mistakes.



## Chapter 2

### What kind of a book is this?

It would be an understatement to say the Bible is a very unique book. In fact there is no other book in the whole world like this. This is the *word of God*, or a written book given by God to man. Many other books have been written *about* God, giving man's ideas and concepts about God. But once we understand that God is the Creator of everything that exists and that He is far above our understanding as human beings, it becomes clear that we cannot discover God using our own limited mental capabilities. If we were able to sit down by ourselves, and use our intellect and imagination to draw up a description of God, it would mean that the God we describe would be within the limitations of our imagination and understanding and not the true God who is far beyond anything we can imagine. We can thus see the limitations of the mythological stories from other religions

which have imagined gods to be in the form of super-human beings with essentially human features. But when God comes and reveals Himself through words we can understand, that is the Bible.

### **The word of God**

When we say that the Bible is the *word of God* we should know what that means. It does not mean that every word in it is from God for us to believe and obey. For example, it contains many words and opinions that different people have spoken, and it should be obvious that since God did not say them they cannot be taken as truths just because they are in the Bible! The Bible has these words, "There is no God," but this is actually a quotation of what 'fools' say (Ps.14:1), and not what God says. In the Book of Ecclesiastes there are many statements that come from the author which are the result of his human wisdom, and which cannot be termed as

words from God to us. For example, the writer, possibly King Solomon towards the later part of his days, says, “As is the fate of the fool, it will also befall me. Why then have I been extremely wise?” Obviously this does not mean that we need not seek after wisdom. Actually Proverbs 4:7 says, “The beginning of wisdom is: acquire wisdom; and with all your acquiring, get understanding.”

God has sovereignly given to us in the Bible what we need for a life of godliness, putting together diverse types of material. All parts of the Bible are not equally important or relevant for us, but each has its own place in the overall revelation from God. There are parts that are especially important for us to believe and obey, while some other parts give us, say, historical background, or what people did (right or wrong) and how God dealt with them. So when we say that the Bible is the word of God what we understand is that the whole book, with its variety of topics, descriptions and

styles is given to us from God. However, at this point it should be clear to us that we need to be careful how we interpret the different parts of the Bible.

To put the same thing in a different way. Some words in the Bible are direct quotations of what God has said, but even the other words are given to us by God. Some passages of the Bible were specifically addressed to different people at different times. Some words were clearly spoken by people in different situations. So we see that not every sentence in the Bible is a direct word from God to us. But everything in the Bible has been put in place by God so that it can be of some profit to us in knowing God, how He deals with people, what He expects from us, what He is planning to do for us, etc. To understand the different portions of the Bible rightly we need to understand the particular meaning and relevance each of them has for us.

Some people reverence the physical book, the Bible, as if it is *divine* with supernatural powers, or as if it is itself God! They keep it under their pillow to ward off bad dreams or wave it at demons to scare them! No. This kind of worship is superstition. Some people wash their hands before they take the Bible, or kiss it before they read it. We must not think of the physical book as 'holy'. The power of the Bible is in God who is behind its word. The paper book or the words do not have any power of their own. There is a mention in the Bible about the Word who became flesh and lived among people (Jn.1:1,14). This is referring to Jesus the Son of God, the second person in the Trinity. We capitalise the word 'Word' here because it refers to God the Son, but we need not capitalise the word 'word' when it refers to the Bible as the word of God.

## **The structure of the Bible**

Even though it was God who has given us the Bible, it was many people, about forty of them, who wrote the books in it. The entire Bible got written over a period of 1500 years. The human authors came from a variety of backgrounds—fishermen, kings, prophets, scholars, priests, scribes, historians, shepherds—and most of them never met most of the others. Yet the wonder of it all is that they all speak of the same God and the same theme. There is *one* single story running from the beginning to the end, the story of God’s love for man. This is a miracle in itself that all these authors wrote independently in their different places on earth and in time, and still bring out this picture of unity in the midst of the diversity. This is because it was God who inspired all of them to write what they wrote. Later on, we shall be addressing the mystery of the inspiration of the Bible in detail.

The Bible has 39 books in the portion commonly referred to as the Old Testament (OT) and 27 books in the New Testament (NT). The OT was written in Hebrew (except for portions of the Book of Daniel in Aramaic) and the NT in Greek. There were other books written during the 400 year gap between the OT and the NT (the Apocrypha) and also after the NT (the *pseudepigrapha*), which are not included in the Bible because they contain historical inconsistencies, contradiction with Biblical truths or writing under false names. The choice of the books to be included in the Bible was the result of people recognising them as such over many years. The Jews in the days of Jesus already had with them the same 39 books of the OT in their synagogues even though they counted only 24 books (because several books were combined, e.g., 1 Samuel and 2 Samuel formed one book), and the fact that Jesus Himself recognised the Jewish Bible gives it the

certificate of authenticity. The 27 NT books were recognised as part of Scripture by the churches over the years. The apostle Peter refers to the writings of the apostle Paul as ‘scripture’ demonstrating this recognition even in those early days (2Pet.3:15,16). The Council of Carthage (AD 397) put a formal stamp on the identification of the books that would form the ‘canon’ of the Bible. The Roman Catholic Church includes the Apocrypha also as a part of their Bible, but the evangelical churches have rejected those books from being recognised as a part of the word of God because of inconsistencies in them.

In the original form none of the books of the Bible had divisions into chapters, paragraphs or verses. These divisions which we have now are therefore not sacred. They were placed there for the convenience of reference and are very helpful. Unfortunately in a few cases these divisions cause a break in continuity of a passage, and can cause



misunderstanding. For example, Romans Chapter 8 begins with “Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” Since many people read a chapter at a time, some may miss the connection between this verse and the previous passage in Chapter 7, which can explain *why* there is no condemnation. In some cases there is ambiguity about words whether they should belong to the end of one sentence or the beginning of the next. Look at Ephesians 1:4,5. V.4 says, “just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love” and v.5 says, “ He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will.” We are not sure whether v.4 should say, “we would be holy and blameless before Him in love,” or whether v.5 should say, “In love He predestined us...” This tells us that we cannot regard the chapter and verse

divisions as accurate. However we can avoid misunderstanding the verse if we keep in mind that we should read whole passages rather than just verses from here and there.

### **Is the Bible really from God?**

An outstanding proof of the divine origin of the Bible is that God transforms the lives of the people who read it honestly and sincerely. Through the centuries after Jesus many have come into a personal relationship with God through faith in Jesus just by reading this book. Many respectable looking people have been convicted of their sinfulness and many 'hopeless' looking sinners have found acceptance from the God of this Bible. The promises of the Bible have sustained, comforted and encouraged countless number of people going through difficult challenges in life, and its teachings have given guidance to others in the different phases of life. Lives of many who would be considered

as gross sinners have been changed by the transforming power of God working through His word. The Bible, even though it was written centuries ago, is still a *living word*.

The Bible itself claims to be inspired by God. Jesus attested to this fact concerning the OT, and the NT books were recognised by the early church as scripture. The number of prophecies in the Bible concerning people and nations which have been fulfilled already, especially those in the OT concerning the details of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, pre-suppose divine authorship. Another interesting sign of authenticity is the honesty with which events concerning ‘heroes’ are mentioned without omitting shameful details.

Many have tried to destroy the Bible completely and remove it from the face of the earth, and many others have tried to destroy faith in the authenticity of the

Bible. But the Bible continues to exist and bless those who come to it in humility. God has protected it so that it continues to conquer the nations. This is a miracle that the Bible and Biblical faith exist in abundance today, even after such attacks against them. Now the Bible is available all around the world through the internet so that even in countries where it is forbidden people can still manage to read it. The work of Bible translators is making it available to most languages in the world. The Bible continues to be the ‘bestselling’ book globally.

The Bible is a book written for everyone, and not especially for scholars or language experts. Ordinary people can now read it and be blessed. There are no hidden messages which only some special people can know. But many false teachers are trying to bring out ‘sensational truths’ by ‘discovering’ hidden codes, distorting the meanings of the original Hebrew and Greek words to

bring out fantastic teachings, giving undue emphasis to historical or cultural aspects, reading meaning into passages which the author never meant (eisegesis), attributing supernatural ‘power’ to numbers, colours, or procedures, etc. We need to judge these by their fruit—fruit in the lives of people who bring such teachings as well as fruit in the form of lives being transformed in the people who follow them. We must keep in mind that the ultimate purpose of God for His word is to be “profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work” (2Tim.16,17). It is not meant to entertain, amuse or satisfy the curiosity of people who have no real interest in this work. Biblical exegesis (the process of bringing out the meaning) is not meant to impress the listeners or readers with new meanings or hidden truths, but to bless them by

leading them closer to the God of the Bible.

## **Chapter 3**

### **The Bible we have now**

As we have seen, the 39 books of the OT were written in Hebrew (except for parts of Daniel which were written in Aramaic) and the 27 books of the NT were written in Greek. The original manuscripts of these books are referred to as autographs. Unfortunately we do not have with us now the autographs of any of the books of the Bible. Of course there was no printing available in the days when they were written, and what people used to do was to make copies by writing down the words carefully and strenuously, and further copies were made from these copies. At the same time, we do have in the museums many ancient copies of the books.

The scribes who made copies were extremely careful in their work because they were conscious that they were dealing with the word of God, and they

adopted various procedures and checks to ensure that errors were avoided. For example, when they finished copying a line of text, the scribes would count the numerical value of all the Hebrew letters used on that line, and add up those values. If the total value for a line of copied text was different from the original, there was obviously a mistake in copying, and then they would throw the new copy away and start another copy from scratch. In spite of such attempts, a few errors seem to have crept in over the centuries in the form of spelling, wrong choice of words that sound alike, etc. However, at the same time, there are a large number of ancient manuscripts available now of the OT and NT books, which are so many more compared to other ancient secular writings. As a result of this, by comparing different manuscripts scholars are able to arrive at a set of Hebrew and Greek texts which are practically the same as the original



autographs (some assume an accuracy of 98.5%).

### **The New Testament text**

When we go a little deeper into the subject, we find that there are two different Greek texts of the New Testament that are being followed by translators today. At the time of the translation of the Bible into Authorised Version or the *King James Version* (KJV) in English (1604-1611), a few Greek New Testament texts were available with some variations among them (mainly four versions from Erasmus and also from Stephanus and Beza). The KJV is based on the best possible reading from these texts. Nowadays many people refer to the Greek text used by KJV as *Textus Receptus*.

In the middle of the nineteenth century Westcott and Hort brought out a Greek text based on some earlier manuscripts

which had been discovered after the KJV became available. They pointed out that later manuscripts were actually products of earlier revisions, and that earlier manuscripts were 'purer'. Many of the new English translations are based on a further improvement of their work called *Novum Testamentum Graece* by Nestle and Aland. There are therefore some differences between the KJV and some of the modern translations.

Some Christians claim that the KJV is the only accurate and reliable version of the Bible, and point out differences between it and the modern translations to show that the modern translations are corrupted versions or even heresies! However we should realise that modern translations use more ancient manuscripts than were available with the translators of the KJV, and so they should be seen as an improvement on the KJV (or closer to the original autographs) instead of the other way.

## Old and new English

The KJV enjoyed universal popularity for a long time since it was brought out. However the 17th century English used in it has undergone a lot of changes with the result that some of those words are difficult to understand now, and some others can be misunderstood because they mean different things now. For example when the KJV says in 1 Timothy 6:18, “That they do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to communicate,” and in Hebrews 13:16, “But to do good and to communicate forget not: for with such sacrifices God is well pleased,” the word ‘communicate’ meant ‘share’ in the days of the KJV translators. But now it means ‘transmit information’! So the *New American Standard Bible* says, “Instruct them to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share” (1Tim.6:18), and “And do not neglect doing good and sharing, for with such sacrifices God is pleased”

(Heb.13:16). So to avoid such mistakes in understanding it is better to use a modern translation to get the correct meaning, even though one may have some sentimental attachment to the KJV. The *New King James Version* uses the same Greek text as the KJV, even though it has improved the English of the KJV.

### **Approaches in translation**

When we come to the modern English translations we must recognise that different approaches have been used by different translators. Some have used a word-for-word translation (e.g., the *New American Standard Bible*), and some others have used a thought-for-thought approach (e.g., the *New International Version*, the *New Living Translation*). By using a word-for-word approach the translation one can go towards faithfulness to the original Hebrew or Greek words. But it may not cater to the idiom and style of the modern English

language, and readers may not find it smooth to read. On the other hand, a thought-for-thought approach gives up a little of accuracy for the sake of improving the flow of reading. In some places the translator's interpretation is also seen to affect the translation without staying with the original meaning.

For example, the NIV says in 1 Peter 4:1, "Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because he who has suffered in his body is done with sin." Is it not difficult to accept that someone who has suffered in his body is able to finish with sin? Usually such people are tempted to sin more in attitude and deeds. The NASB says, "Therefore, since Christ has suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same purpose, because he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin." The Greek word used for body is *soma* and that for flesh is *sarx*, and so it is easy to see that the NIV has not done a word-

for-word translation, but used a more easily understood word ‘body’ instead of ‘flesh’. If we see that the word ‘flesh’ is used several times in the NT to denote the sinful nature (cf. Gal.5:24), we can understand that those who choose to let the flesh suffer by not yielding to its desires can stop from sinning.

The *English Standard Version* uses the word-for-word approach most of the time, but also tries to keep in mind the readability of the language. The *Living Bible* and the *Message Bible* are paraphrases and not translations, written with the aim of conveying the message of the passages in a simple and an easily understandable manner. But then such paraphrases invariably convey something of the theological interpretations of the translators rather than the accurate meaning of the original text. The *Amplified Bible* provides possible equivalent and alternative English words to represent the original Hebrew or Greek words so that the

modern reader can get a better exposure to the meaning.

It should be obvious that if we want to study the Bible seriously and understand what God is trying to tell us through it, it would be good to use more than one translation.

We can conclude this chapter by reiterating that through the use of many manuscripts and the study of the many scholars, what we have with us now is, to a very large extent, the same text that was in the autographs. The allegation that some sceptics make that no one knows what the Bible originally said is not true at all.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Inspiration and authority**

#### **Inspiration**

We believe that the Bible is a unique book which was inspired by God Himself. The Bible itself claims it, and also the experience of millions of Christians backs up that claim. “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work” (2Tim.3:16,17). But it is very important for us to understand what inspiration means and implies, in order to be able to interpret passages in the Bible accurately. Wrong interpretations resulting from a wrong understanding of inspiration have caused many serious problems for people, groups and churches.



While some people tend to neglect the supernatural factor (God's inspiration) involved in the writing of the Bible, and treat it as a 'good' book containing many moral values, some others treat the Bible as a divine book while overlooking the contribution of the human authors in it. Both these approaches are wrong; liberal theologians tend to treat the Bible more as writings of man about God, and evangelical Christians tend to overplay the divine origin of every word of the Bible without accommodating any human element in the writing. These approaches are also simplistic in that they neglect the mysterious operation of God and human authors working together. If we examine the passages in the Bible carefully, it would (or rather, it should) become obvious to us that neither divine nor human operation alone can account for its overall character. In some places the divine element stands out and in other places the human element is obvious.

All the 39 books which we have in the OT were recognised by the Jews as sacred scripture before the time of Jesus. Jesus and the apostles have quoted from all of them as God's word. The 27 books of the NT were recognised by the early church as being 'scripture' immediately after they were written and identified as such by later church leaders. Peter referred to the writings of Paul as 'scripture' (by implication in 2Pet.3:15,16). Believing Christians who have read these books over the centuries have also attested to the divine origin of these words as the words 'come alive' for them, 'speak' to them and demonstrate themselves as God's 'living' word.

It is important to think about how this inspiration by the Holy Spirit took place, and what the role of the authors was. This is crucial for us when we seek to understand the true meaning of different passages and what God is telling us through them.

## **1. Were the words of the Bible dictated by God to the authors?**

This is like a busy author dictating his words to his secretary. Though the secretary is the one who actually ‘writes’ the book, she is not the author. It is not her words that get written even though she is the one who does the physical writing.

It becomes very obvious that the Bible was not written like this. The different books of the Bible use different styles, choice of words and even grammatical forms, which could not have been the case if it was the same author (God) who had dictated them. If God had personally written every book (through dictating them to the human authors), there would have been an accurate choice of words, a precision of expression, a clear and systematic coverage of different subjects, no differences among different descriptions of the same events, or vagueness of expression in different

places. Actually this approach would have minimised the role of the human authors and they would have been no more than tools in God's hands without any possibility of expression from their side.

## **2. Did God just inspire the authors with ideas and leave it to them to write things in the way they chose?**

This would have meant that the authors would only write what they could understand, and they would decide on the best words to use, the best way to express the ideas that were in their head, what to emphasise, etc. In such a case the Bible would have ended up as a book that *contained* the ideas of God but which, as a whole, could not be really referred to as the word of God. We can say that many Christian speakers and authors *now also* are 'inspired' by the Holy Spirit in this way, but none of them can claim their words to be the words from God.

### **3. Did God supervise the thoughts and feelings of the human authors in such a way that finally it was His exact words that came out in writing?**

This is what many evangelical scholars teach, as they try to substantiate their doctrine of *plenary* and *verbal* inspiration of the Bible. Plenary inspiration means that the entire Bible (and not just some parts of it) was inspired by God, and verbal inspiration means that the final output (the autographs) contained exactly the words that God wanted. Even though, these scholars say, God did operate through the different personalities of the authors with their vocabularies and styles, in the end He managed to bring out the exact words He wanted to say. However, this appears to be a rather simplistic approach.

This approach does not take into consideration the diverse nature of the different parts of the Bible in terms of

*precision* of expression or the lack of it, *ambiguity* of truths in some places, *contradictions* in the different accounts of the same events, etc., which cannot be understood as God bringing out the very words He wanted. At the same time we also need to recognise that God was involved in the process as the human authors did the writing, making sure that whatever He considered to be important—all things that we need to be clear about—would be expressed precisely and without ambiguity. We see Jesus and the apostles recognising that sometimes the particular word that is used will make all the difference in terms of meaning when they pointed out the significance of single words from the OT (Matt.22:32;Gal.3:16). But we must also remember that this approach cannot be applied ubiquitously to *all* the parts of the Bible because in many places words have to be understood as ‘human’ with their colloquial and not literal meanings.

Evangelical scholars also claim *inerrancy* and *infallibility* for the autographs, which follow automatically when the inspiration is plenary and verbal. But different scholars define inerrancy and infallibility in different ways with different technical explanations to qualify their statements, in attempting to explain the different challenges we face when we examine some details in the Bible. The problem is that ordinary Christians who do not know all these technical explanations get confused when they simply believe in plenary, verbal inspiration with the accompanying inerrancy and infallibility, and then come across practical difficulties in the text they read.

One of the most serious *implications* of the assumption that every word in the Bible is *exactly* as God would have it, along with the concepts of infallibility and inerrancy, is that many people attribute unnaturally precise meanings to words that are not meant to be

understood like that. Many people take different verses as standalone truths, like statements in a text book of science or a legal document, and get into serious error. For example, if something is found in one verse in the Bible and we assume it is completely reliable in itself because ‘every word of God is true’, we may make the mistake of not qualifying this truth with other parts of the truth found elsewhere in the Bible.

Think of taking the phrase, “and with His stripes we are healed” (Isa.53:5 KJV), to apply to physical healing, totally out of its context in the passage which is actually all about how the Messiah would suffer and die in order to deliver His people from our sins! Or think of how some people attribute a precision of meaning to words without understanding the literary style, e.g., interpreting Proverbs 18:21 to mean that the tongue actually has power to bring life or death. Ignoring such realities of the human language because of the



human contribution to the Bible has given rise to many extremist ideas, heresies and divisions of churches. It is the desire to warn against this type of mistake that has primarily motivated me to write this book.

### **The treasure in earthen vessels**

What we find is that there is really a great mystery here, as to how exactly this inspired writing took place. When God chose to reveal His truths through the imperfect medium of human beings, He was, in fact, taking a calculated risk which He considered to be at an acceptable level. If He wanted His truths to come through *perfectly* He would have to practically dictate every word for the human authors to write down, giving no freedom for man to bring in his personality, understanding, knowledge, skills, etc., into the process. This would mean that the human authors would not have any way of corrupting the word of God.

But that is not how God has worked with man from the beginning. God's sovereignty has always worked along with the free will of man. This process does have its consequences. If we understand the implications of God and man working together, we would also be able to account for both the reliability of God's words as they have emerged from the process and some less than perfect forms that have also come in as a result.

Generally speaking, evangelical scholars try to extol the contribution of God by projecting unrealistic levels of inerrancy and infallibility which belie the facts, and liberal theologians major on the human limitations seen in the Bible and ignore the divine sovereignty in bringing out God's truth in spite of human limitations. What we see in the Bible is a combination of divine inspiration and human authorship.

In several parts of the Bible the prophets have directly quoted words given by

God. Many of the prophetic books in the Bible have many such passages. Many prophets of the OT also describe the origin of their writings with, “The word of the Lord came to ...” There are many books that are mainly historical records written by people but still under the inspiration of God. In this case, the inspiration of God brings out what we need to know and learn from history, and things that teach us about God, His ways, people and their ways. The Book of Proverbs is a collection of proverbs which, by definition, are concise statements that are full of meaning and which are generally true (but which can have exceptions). But the additional factor is that the proverbs in this book have the sanction of the Holy Spirit of God. The Book of Psalms essentially contains songs composed by human authors (mostly David) expressing their prayer, praise and adoration of God, and their thoughts, questions and fears in relation to God and what was happening

to them. However, the inspiration of God has worked along with the human composition in such a way that many of them became messianic (speaking indirectly about the Messiah or Christ), prophetic, and promises of God for comfort and encouragement to His people. Ecclesiastes is about the conclusions reached by a worldly wise man after his pursuit of truth and reality based on his own understanding, and some of these conclusions are also in line with God's truths. God has inspired the people who compiled the books of the Bible to include this and the Song of Songs (which is a poetic writing about the human love between a man and a woman), apparently to teach us, among other things, the limitations of human wisdom and the essential purity and beauty of human love. Facts such as these tell us that we need to understand the existing diversity among the books of the Bible, and therefore be careful how we interpret the different parts.

One implication of this is that where the divine element is obvious it becomes entirely reliable and trustworthy, and when the human element is obvious we need to look at it more carefully.

To reiterate, God has inspired the writing of the Bible, but He used imperfect human authors to pen it down. The divine source has found expression through an imperfect medium. Without taking absolute control of expression through dictation, or leaving it to people to express things their own way, God has revealed His truths through His word in a very special way.

We need to recognise, or take into account in a balanced manner, the treasure of God's word as well as the earthen vessel that contains the treasure in order to avoid extremes of error. There will be an error if we neglect the human part and assume only divine inspiration (which many evangelicals seem to do), and another error if we

focus on the human element and ignore the divine inspiration (which many liberals seem to do).

### **How can we understand this mystery?**

Clearly there is a mystery here that cannot be *fully* understood. This is similar to realising that we do not know how the one and only God has three Persons in the godhead, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, or that we do not understand how Jesus could be fully God and Man at the same time. However we cannot afford to neglect one part of the truth in order to emphasise another. Just because it is difficult to understand we must not opt to take an idealistic or an extreme position which then becomes unrealistic.

Think of the situation where God is in full control of the universe which He has created. He *can* or *He is able* to do whatever He wants (omnipotence), and in fact He does whatever pleases Him

(Ps.115:5). However in His wisdom He has given demons and men a limited amount of free will and power to do whatever *they* please. We can understand this as a small circle of free will within a huge circle that represents God's will. We do have some free will, but there is a limit to what we can do with our free will. God's will overrides everything that we or demons may do. There are some things He may permit us to do, but He will not allow things to go beyond His permissible limits (1Cor.10:13; Job.38:11).

But as a result of this free will that is given to men and demons, God has to live with a certain amount of sin and chaos in the universe as Satan and man misuse their freedom. For us who live within that chaos it might look like a huge amount of chaos. To many people it might even appear as if things are not within God's control any more. But we know that God maintains His sovereignty and control in spite of this.

And He continues to work out His original plans for the world and man in spite of all that man is doing. At the same time we must recognise that it is not God who is responsible for the problems in the world. We are tempted to consider it as if He is, if we place one-sided attention to the sovereignty of God without considering the human element.

Should we not see a similarity with this, and the way the Bible has been written? God has inspired the authors to write down what He wanted, but He has also not taken away their freedom to express things in their own words and according to their style, skills, etc. Therefore some authors have been able to express ideas in a more precise manner than others, some follow better chronological order, some follow a more logical and progressive method of teaching, some tend to be repetitive, some use more figures of speech, some tend to become rather abstract in their expression, etc. These are some of the resulting



problems. The Bible is not always orderly, systematic or chronological. Some truths and instructions are not as clear as we would like them to be. Some even appear to be ambiguous. When we get down to details, there are also some differences among what different authors say about the same events, which look even like contradictions.

Some of these are the result of copying errors as old manuscripts were copied entirely manually to create new copies (in the absence of digital storage or printers). Some later manuscripts show signs of editors who have probably tried to ‘correct’ or ‘clarify’ what they felt to be in error. Some discrepancies such as differences in details among the four different gospel accounts may be explained by thinking that those four authors had different target groups of readers in mind. But at the same time it would be unrealistic to claim that *all* textual controversies can be explained in this way.

When we talk about ‘discrepancies’ we must keep in mind at the same time that whatever ‘problems’ we find with the Bible are not of such significance or intensity as to cause error in our understanding of God or our life with Him. For example, if it was one or two angels that appeared on the day of resurrection, or one or two demoniacs who met Jesus at Gadarenes (or Gerasenes!) how does that matter to our salvation? In other words, even though there are textual problems that hostile people love to point out, they are not of the type that should unsettle our faith. Therefore, the final fact is that God message still comes through loud and clear, even though the human authors have added some ‘noise’ of their own. In other words, when God chose to use human authors to write down His book, He has made allowance for a certain level of ‘error tolerance’ just as He did when He gave angels and men some level of free will which would result in a

certain permitted level of chaos in the world.

An assumption of ‘verbal, plenary inspiration’ implies that each and every word in the Bible is precisely chosen by God to reveal His truths. Should we take it that God did this by telling the authors exactly what they should write (which would amount to dictation), or that within the limits of freedom He gave to the authors and the ‘imperfection’ it resulted in, He still ensured that the choice of words was entirely within His *permissible limits*? The latter view would be explained somewhat like this.

In any manufacture, specifications of sizes of the components would be precisely defined, including a specified tolerance level. For a particular application this could be stated as 500 mm +/- 0.01 mm; the actual size may be anywhere between 499.99 and 500.01 mm. For another higher precision component, the specification would be

more stringent. Perhaps in a somewhat similar way, God has placed some error tolerance factor for human authors producing His word in such a way that the final result is what He wanted to the level of precision which He has prescribed for that subject. In places where it really matters, the specifications He has put down would be stringent, but in less precise situations, the tolerance levels could be higher. Overall, God has generated a product that meets all His functional requirements.

Let us look at an example. The descriptions given by the gospel writers on what happened early morning on the day of resurrection differ in detail, as to who all went to the tomb, how many angels were seen there, what the angel said, and the sequence of events. This raises many controversies if *only* the divine inspiration is assumed, leading some to wonder how the inspired word of God could have such ‘contradictions’. But once human authorship is also taken

into consideration it becomes possible to think that different authors have expressed different parts of the story, from their knowledge and understanding. The parts which each one shared were true in themselves, and we can see that if we construct a bigger picture by putting all these pieces together.

For another example, look at Matthew 21:10 which says, “When He had entered Jerusalem, *all the city* was stirred, saying, ‘Who is this?’” If we take the human element into consideration we would really take this to mean that *a lot of people in the city* were stirred up, and if we were to take the true implication of verbal inspiration into effect this would imply that every single person in the city was stirred up! (Is it critical to our faith or life whether we understand ‘all’ to mean ‘all’ in this case or do we have enough flexibility and maturity to understand that this is not really important in this particular case?) This is probably an example where everyone,

including those who insist on verbal inspiration, automatically knows that this is a human expression not to be taken literally. But this nevertheless serves to prove our point.

Look at another example where Matthew quotes Jesus as saying, “Blessed are the poor in spirit” (Matt.5:3), and Luke quotes Him as, “Blessed are you who are poor” (Lk.6:20).

Are these a demonstration of God’s error tolerance level while working through human authors? It is obvious from other parts of the Bible and common sense that Luke’s words have to be interpreted in a special manner and not in their plain sense. Did God allow this discrepancy to remain in the Bible because He knew that the first statement would easily clarify what He meant, while He was tolerating an inaccurate or incomplete statement from Luke?

## **Shall we sit in judgment?**

Some scholars take the approach of proclaiming a 'flawless Bible' possibly to avoid having to take a position of 'sitting in judgment' over the Bible, to decide which part of the Bible is to be taken as coming from God in a reliable and trustworthy manner without error and which part has to be treated as having a lack of clarity, consistency or accuracy because of the human element creeping in. They try to manage this by saying that every single word in the Bible is there exactly as God Himself has wanted it, thereby preventing further arguments. But as a result they remove the human element in the process of writing, and this actually results in a lot of confusion! Surely we need to submit ourselves to the authority of the word of God as given to us in the Bible. However, this kind of approach mentioned above does not actually manage to eliminate the need for our thinking and exercising judgment. Do

we not have to use our mind still to understand, for example, which part is directly applicable to us now and in what way, and which part is a historical narrative given to us mainly for our information and learning?

The other concern some people may have is that if verbal and plenary inspiration is not insisted on, it will throw open the possibility of different people accepting only whatever each one likes from the Bible. Obviously there is such a possibility. But in order to totally eliminate that possibility shall we go on to an extreme position (and it is really an extreme position), of completely eliminating the human element in the process of writing?

Also, this very assertion (of verbal and plenary inspiration) can become a stumbling block to thinking people. When people get the impression that these Bible scholars are insisting on making unrealistic and unreasonable



assertions about the Bible, when it is only very plain to them that there are obvious problems with these assertions, people are tempted to throw away all confidence in such scholarship and perhaps in the Bible itself which these scholars promote!

Those who hold tenaciously to the verbal, plenary inspiration approach (who minimise the human participation) go to great lengths to provide explanations for the several doubtful aspects of the Biblical text. However, would it not be more comfortable and natural to recognise some limitations (as compared to a fully divine responsibility), due to human participation in the process of divine inspiration? With this approach too we can still believe that God has conveyed whatever He wanted to, so that the text is still “able to teach, reprove, correct, and train us in righteousness.” The doubtful elements, whatever they are, have not been able to detract God from

accomplishing this purpose. Therefore we do not have to labour for proving for God's word some attributes that appear to be straightaway unrealistic. Our laboured explanations may smack of intellectual dishonesty when we try to defend these attributes 'at any cost'.

Actually, when we do recognise that there is a human element involved in the writing of the Bible, it requires only common sense in most cases to figure out how to understand different passages in the right way!

Let us therefore hold to the understanding that the Bible was entirely inspired by God in an overall sense and written down by people in a way that His truths are preserved. God has revealed Himself to us through His word, shown us His way of salvation to us and told us how we ought to live. His word is 'living' by which we mean that God speaks to our hearts as we read His

word, meets our needs and guides us in our life.

## **Authority of the Bible**

Since the Bible is the word of God, it asserts authority for itself. It becomes the ultimate standard and the final reference for our life. If God has said it, that settles it. (How we are to interpret what God has said is the subject of later chapters). Biblical authority is usually described by scholars with respect to three aspects—inerrancy, infallibility and authoritative-ness.

It is important that we understand these terms clearly because different Christians mean somewhat different things when they use these words. Many Christians use ‘inerrancy’ as relating to the absolute correctness of the Bible in factual assertions (including historical and scientific assertions). We have already seen how there are discrepancies in the way different authors describe

events which make this definition unrealistic. We must also remember that many descriptions are given in poetic or figurative ways and are not meant to be understood literally. For examples when the Bible talks of the four corners of the earth it only refers to the extent of the earth in every direction, and it is not meant to allude to a picture of a flat earth.

Obviously inerrancy should not be expected in terms of typographical accuracy of the Hebrew or Greek manuscripts which are available now, or the words used in translations into modern languages. But can we not understand that whatever God tells us in the Bible is true, even though we may need to make some special efforts in some cases to understand what exactly God means?

Infallibility relates to the absolute correctness of the Bible in matters of doctrine. Of course, if we were to

assume that the doctrines taught by the Bible could be wrong, the Bible would immediately cease to have any authority for us. If the *moral* teachings of the Bible are, as some say, relative to the existing culture when they were written and are not necessarily applicable to us, then again the authority of the Bible would take a hit. But it is not really difficult to discern in most cases what are given in the Bible as supra-cultural principles of God for man that will be true for all time. In that case, they stand there with the authority of God Himself. But needless to repeat again, when we try to understand doctrines from the Bible we should also take into consideration their context, to whom it was addressed, how the terms of God's dealings with people have changed from the OT to the NT, etc., if we are to avoid errors. Here it is especially good to remember that many passages cannot be understood in isolation but only in the context of the whole Bible, and this also

applies to doctrines which need to be understood in their relationship with all other doctrines.

Authoritativeness relates to the correctness of the Bible in questions of practice in morality. This follows from the infallibility of biblical doctrines, the recognition of the divine authorship and our need to submit to them. One implication is that whenever the ‘world’ or society tells us something which is opposed to what the Bible teaches us in terms of moral values or behaviour, we will choose to stay with the Bible. For example, when people begin to redefine ‘marriage’ in terms of relationships between any two people irrespective of gender, we can hold on to God’s definition in the Bible as an exclusive relationship between a man and a woman. In other words, we shall consider the Bible to have the final authority for us in terms of values, principles, ethics, morals, teachings and practices.

## Chapter 5

### Literary styles

Human writing adopts different styles such as prose, poetry, allegory, figures of speech, idioms, etc., and the Bible authors also use these types of styles on different occasions. Even though these writers penned down scripture as they were inspired by the Holy Spirit, they used their own natural way of expressing different things. The Bible actually has additional literary forms compared to usual literature, such as parables, prophecy, and apocalyptic (an unveiling or unfolding of things not previously known) and eschatological (the study of the end of things) writings. If we do not recognise these different literary genre or styles used in the passage which we are reading, we can sometimes misunderstand the meaning completely. This happens quite a lot among Christians, especially among those who over-emphasise divine inspiration and treat

every word and sentence with equal authority as utterances of God. Jesus Himself used different literary forms when He spoke, and in order to understand what exactly He meant in specific cases, it is important to identify the particular genre.

### **Promise seekers!**

One of the common errors people get into when they do not differentiate literary styles is that they read ‘promises’ into many unlikely places! Many Christians are desperately looking for promises of God from all over the Bible, and they catch hold of every sentence that looks to be in the form of a promise without examining whether the sentence is to be understood at all as a promise or whether it means literally what it says, apart from checking whether it is meant for them.

For example, the Bible says, “Train up a child in the way he should go, even



when he is old he will not depart from it” (Prov.22:6). Even though this looks like a promise, it is not! It is a proverb, which is just a statement based on common observation which is generally true but which can obviously have exceptions to it. In fact there are many such exceptions to this statement that we can see all around us! The intent of this statement is not to give us a promise but to encourage us to train up our children in the right way if we want them to live right when they are on their own. It is also a warning that unless we take the trouble of training our children, they cannot be expected to automatically walk in godly ways. Some people who do not recognise the literary style but treat this as a promise end up in judging others or condemning themselves!

Let us look at some of the literary genre in the Bible and learn how we need to understand them.

## Poetry

We are all familiar with the way poets use their words to paint up a picture, dramatize events, stir up emotions, and catch attention. They make use of ‘poetic licence’ to take liberties with grammar, bend facts and play with words to make things rhyme and follow rhythms. We know that every word in the poem is not to be taken literally. It is this same approach that we need to take when we read poetry in the Bible. When we read the songs of Deborah (Judg.5), Moses (Exo.15) and David (The Psalms), which are well known for their poetry, we can read of extraordinary things such as mountains quaking, stars fighting, God’s anger consuming enemies like chaff, His nostrils blowing water into heaps, smoke coming out of God’s nose, and fire from His mouth. Most of us know instinctively that this is poetic language to be taken only in that sense. When we read of the eyes of the Lord and His everlasting arms we know that these are

just ways of expressing something of the nature of God, since God is a spirit and He does not have a body with eyes or arms. (This particular usage is called anthropomorphism which is used to express intangible ideas about God in human forms.) “For the eyes of the Lord move to and fro throughout the earth that He may strongly support those whose heart is completely His” (2Chr.16:9) means, of course, that God is looking over everyone and will support everyone who follows Him wholeheartedly. But when it is used in its poetic form it gives us a word picture of what is happening, even though it is not factually correct to imply that God has ‘eyes’. ‘The four winds’ and the ‘four corners of the earth’ can also be understood as a poetic usage rather than physical facts.

Poetry also comes in several places in the Bible even when the book itself is not considered to be a book of poetry. Prophecies use poetry many times in conveying ideas, and then we need to

avoid taking them literally. Look at 1 Kings 22:19-23, where the prophet Micaiah is painting up a poetic picture of a scene in heaven. It would be a mistake to take this literally and assume that God asks angels for ideas to deal with situations or that He sends evil spirits to deceive people. We know this from the nature of God which is revealed to us from other parts of the Bible.

Another aspect of poetry is the way ideas are expressed in a certain pattern, in order to help people to remember them better. When Jesus talked about asking, seeking and knocking He was working with similar ideas placed sequentially to get a better effect from the listeners. Sometimes He mentioned opposite sides of the truth such as a good tree producing good fruit and a bad tree producing bad fruit, and a faithful man who is faithful in small things becoming faithful even in big things while and unfaithful man who is unfaithful in small things ending up being unfaithful even in

big things. Another way He used opposites was to say those who exalt themselves would be humbled and those who humbled themselves would be exalted, and those who tried to save their own life would lose it while those who gave up their life for Him would gain it. What we see is that Jesus (and others) used this approach to imprint their ideas deeply into the minds of the listeners or the readers.

### **Figures of speech**

What did Jesus mean when He referred to the eye which is clear (Lk.11:34)? He was not, obviously, thinking of our physical eyes, as we can easily see from the context. But by using the picture of our eyes which observe things and look ahead at our destination, He was helping us to think of our spirit or inner man which needs to be clear about what we value and where we want to reach. This is a typical use of a *figure of speech* which makes use of a word or phrase

that means something more or something other than what it seems to say. Sometimes Jesus would use satire or sarcasm to convey an impression or an idea. When Jesus asked us to pluck out our eye or cut off our hand if they caused us to sin (Mt.5:29,30), was He not using a hyperbole or an over-statement to drive home a point? Jesus once said that it would be easier for a camel to enter the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God (Mt.19:24). Instead of labouring hard to find literal explanations for camels and needles, wouldn't it be much simpler if we recognised that He was just being humorous and sarcastic? When He asks us to 'hate' our father and mother (Lk.14:26), we know instinctively that it is an exaggerated expression to teach us to love God more than we love such loved ones (Mt.10:37). Not letting the left hand know what the right hand is doing (Mt.6:3), is obviously another figure of speech to illustrate how we

should not seeking to impress others with our generosity, rather than a literal commandment to be followed. Has Jesus actually sanctioned the use of arms (Mt.10:34)—swords, guns, etc.—or was He only indicating that sometimes a believer may have opposition from his own household? Does He really want us to give to *everyone who asks*, and turn the other cheek when someone strikes us on our right cheek (Mt.5:39,42), or was He, in fact, teaching us a certain attitude of mind towards those who would take advantage of us? (Let us note here in passing, that Jesus Himself did not turn the other cheek when He was struck - Jn.18:22,23). “The tongue is a fire,” says James (Jas.3:6), meaning to convey the fact that it has a great potential to create a lot of havoc if we use it without control. It is clear that no one should imagine that James was actually stating a fact by equating a tongue with fire! The Bible uses a lot of such figures of

speech, and it is obvious that we should understand them in their proper sense.

### **Human colloquial expressions**

It is a well-known fact that when we people speak to one another we often use words which are not very precise, but which our listeners understand in the right way anyway! For example, when we say the time is 9 o'clock, we don't even intend to be precise to the second. Sometimes we could be off by ten minutes either way, if we think that that is the precision which the listeners really expect. The authors of the Bible also used this type of expression at times where the expected precision was not very high. For example, "When He had entered Jerusalem, all the city was stirred, saying, 'Who is this?'" (Mt.21:10), does not really mean to say every single person in the city was stirred. We know it is just a common way of expression which everyone understands clearly. The problem comes



if we imagine that since this is the word of God, 'all' must mean only 'all'!

What did Jesus mean when He said, "Whatever you ask in My name, that will I do" (Jn.14:13)? It cannot mean we just have to ask, and we will get it, whatever it is! We see that when we read another part of the Bible which clarifies that only what we ask according to God's will is going to get done (1Jn.5:14). We also know sometimes, if we pester God too much, He may give in to us just to teach us a lesson (Ps.106:15).

On the other hand, we should know when God says something precisely. When Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; *no one comes to the Father but through Me,*" (Jn.14:6), that is correct. The apostles also understood it right when they said, "And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been

given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts.4:12).

“If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him” (1Jn.2:15). This does not have the precision of a scientific statement which makes love of the world and love of the Father mutually exclusive. We who truly love the Father know that sometimes we are tempted with a love for the world. That does not mean that we do not love God at all, as this verse would seem to mean literally.

Does “It shall be done to you according to your faith” mean that it is like a mathematical proportion? Does it mean that if the blind men who got healed had only half the amount of faith that they actually had, they would have got only one eye opened? Ridiculous! Was not Jesus simply saying that He was going to do what the blind men had asked for in faith? “Your faith has saved you” does not really mean that faith has some

power in itself to save us. It is Jesus who saves us when we go to Him in faith. Jesus was only saying that He was saving this woman because He saw her faith. These are just two examples of how people attribute unreasonable precision and meaning to ordinary human language.

In mathematics we could say that if  $a=b$  and  $b=c$ , then  $a=c$ . When the Bible says that sin shall not rule over us because we are under grace, and also that God gives grace to the humble, can we conclude categorically that if we fall into sin it is *only* because we are not humble? Most of the times the language that the Bible uses is common human language and it is not meant to be taken with a mathematical precision.

So, we must examine each context, and what the rest of the Bible says, to see how we can interpret different passages rightly.

## Parables

Parables in the Bible were generally “earthly stories with a heavenly meaning.” Jesus used many of them to illustrate His points. From a literary point of view, they must be seen as different from allegories which are “representations of abstract ideas or principles by characters, figures, or events in a narrative.” For Christians the most famous allegory is *The Pilgrim’s Progress* by John Bunyan, where a man’s spiritual journey and the challenges he faces are portrayed in the form of a physical journey. The Bible also uses allegories, e.g., using a vine to represent Israel (Psa.80), and referring to Israel and Judah as two women (Ezek.16,17). In an allegory, every detail of the story has a spiritual meaning. But it is not so with most parables. Jesus did use an allegorical interpretation when He narrated the parable of the sower. But what we find in His other parables is that

it would be a big mistake if we use that approach.

Jesus used parables usually to drive home just one point (or two in exceptional cases). Our aim should be to identify those points. In order to do this we can ask ourselves the question what one thing Jesus is trying to teach us through the whole parable. Sometimes there may be more than one point, as in the case of the Prodigal Son, one each in connection with both the sons. But if we go on looking at every detail in that parable and try to find some spiritual meaning there, we may end up completely off the track. For example, if we look at the parable of the Good Samaritan, what Jesus aimed at was only to answer the question, “Who is my neighbour?” In the parable of the rich man and the beggar, the point that comes out is that we have opportunity to make our life’s choice only when we are on earth, and after that we cannot do anything but to face the consequences. If

we try to read some meaning from the other details there we end up in speculation.

## **Proverbs**

Proverbs are concise statements of wisdom, which come out as a result of general observation of life over a large period of time. We can say that they are generally true, but it is not as if they are God's laws that cannot be violated. They can have exceptions. When we read them we need to look for the wisdom or principles that we can get from there, and not for eternal *laws*.

We have noted earlier, it says, "Train up a child in the way he should go, even when he is old he will not depart from it" (Prov.22:6). This is not a promise from God, but an instruction to take the training of children very seriously if we want them to walk in godly ways. However, we know that parental training is not the only thing that counts in a

child's life. A person's personality, the experiences he faces as he grows up, the influence of friends and school, etc., are all factors that contribute to his life. We also know from real life that there are several instances of some children of godly parents who go astray.

Look at Proverbs 18:21, "Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruit." What this means is simply that we ought to be careful how we speak, because it can have good or bad results. But to read it as if it is a statement of fact and assume that the tongue has magical or spiritual powers to cause things to happen is foolish and unrealistic.

"Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you will also be like him. Answer a fool as his folly deserves, that he not be wise in his own eyes" (Prov.26:4,5). If we are in the habit of taking every imperative statement in the Bible as a commandment to obey, this

would stump us! But this example goes to teach us that we should interpret the Book of Proverbs in the same way as we generally do with common proverbs. The difference is that these proverbs have the approval of God on them.

## **Prophecy**

We could divide prophecy into two types, foretelling and forth-telling. In the OT, prophecy was usually of the foretelling type, declaring things that would happen sometime in the future. (It appears to me that when King Saul started ‘prophesying’ when he came into a group of prophets, it may not have been anything to do with foretelling, but perhaps something like speaking in tongues – 1Sam.10:10.) Many times, we also notice in the OT, prophetic utterances had dual applications, one for the immediate future concerning people or nations and one for the distant future. Forth-telling, on the other hand, is about bringing forth a truth that is already



known in such a way that it hits home to the heart in a person's need. Paul describes this type of prophecy in this way, "one who prophesies speaks to men for edification and exhortation and consolation" (1Cor.14:3). In a more general way we could describe prophecy as speaking out to people what God wants to tell them.

When it comes to the foretelling type of prophecy we must understand that there are some things God has said about the future that will definitely happen. For example, when God says that Jesus will come again, it will happen exactly as He has said. But there are other prophecies that proclaim His judgment on people or nations that might change if the people repent. The outstanding example in the OT is about Jonah's prophecy to Nineveh that Nineveh would be overthrown after 40 days. But we know that when the king and the people of Nineveh repented, this judgment was withdrawn. The point is that in such

cases we must see the mercy of God overtaking His judgment (Jas.2:13), and not question why God's prophecy did not take place.

Prophecies related to the apocalypse (God bringing the final destruction on evil powers) or eschatology (related to the end of the days), are usually couched in very poetic language or metaphor, which, I believe, is deliberate, in order to convey certain indications of events that are going to take place without giving away too many details. The Book of Revelation is a typical example. In view of this, we should be very cautious not to read literary meanings out of the writings but to understand the truth being conveyed through pictorial representations. For example, no one will try to imagine Jesus as someone with a sword coming out of His mouth (Rev.1:16)!

The way the Book of Daniel or the Book of Revelation have been written, it

becomes extremely difficult to identify a chronological order in which events would happen or to specify exactly what some figures of speech represent, even though some people seem to claim absolute accuracy for their interpretation! Even though Jesus has warned specifically that no one would know the exact day of His return, many people still think they can do one better!

## **History**

A large part of the Bible is made up of historical narration. It begins with a description of how God created everything—the universe, the earth, everything on it and finally man. We can trace a story starting from there, proceeding to tell us what man did wrong and the different steps God took to bring man back to Him, and finally culminating in unveiling God's master plan for the salvation of man through grace—unmerited favour. The book ends with a view of things that will lead to the

end of life on this earth and the move to a new earth and heaven where regenerated men and women will be with God forever.

The history record includes what God did and what different people did, interspersed with teachings and commandments of God for man. When we read the Bible, one of the things we need to keep in mind is not to confuse every historical report as God's instruction for us. The Bible reports faithfully many wrong things that people did, spoke and thought. Just because they are in God's word, it does not mean that they are words from God to us to follow! Just because some godly man did something wrong in his life and it is reported in the Bible, it does not mean that God is OK with what he did.

At the same time, we must recognise that we can learn many principles from the good things that people did and the mistakes they made. We can also learn

from how God responded to different people and situations. We need to examine things to see if some promises God made to different people under special situations are applicable to us too, and if so, in what way, because not every promise mentioned in the Bible is for us.

When we read that Jacob said he had seen God face to face (Gen.32:3), we ought to think that this was just how *he interpreted* his experience with God. He could not have actually seen God, because God Himself has said that no one could see His face and live (Exo.33:20). Jacob said to Esau that he saw Esau's face as if it was the face of God (Gen.33:10). We can understand this as Jacob's crafty way of flattering his brother rather than as a literary report of what happened.

In Acts of the Apostles we find that when the church first began to meet together in houses, they 'broke bread'

(referring to what some would call now as the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion) *every day* from house to house (2:46). Later, as the number increased, and as the apostles thought more about this, this practice seems to have changed to breaking bread *on the first day of every week* (20:7). Still later, when the apostle Paul wrote down instructions for the churches, he did not mention any frequency at all for the breaking of bread, but said that whenever we did it, it should be done in remembrance of what Jesus had done for us (1Cor.11:26).

What we can learn from this is that we should make a distinction when we read the Bible to see what things are to be followed, and which are instances from which we can draw some lessons.

## **Silence**

Somebody has said that we should speak (in terms of spiritual matters) only about

what the Bible speaks about, and refrain from speaking about subjects the Bible is silent about. However, the Bible is silent about *many* things, because it was meant to lead us to God (Jn.5:39,40), and not to serve as an encyclopaedia or a source book. Many times our problems of present day life are not directly addressed in the Bible, and Bible teachers need to take on the responsibility of interpreting the teachings of the Bible as applicable for those occasions. The tendency to keep silent because the Bible is silent about some topic actually prevents many Christians from taking a clear view on many modern issues in society.

At the same time, arguments using the silence of Scripture to imply prohibition of certain things is ridiculous. One example is that of teaching that since the NT does not tell us to use musical instruments in church worship it would be wrong to use them!

## Chapter 6

### The old and the new covenants

It is unfortunate that the Bible has been divided into two parts called the Old Testament and the New Testament, because this hides the real meaning of those words. When we hear these two names we only think about these parts of the Bible. But actually the names refer to two *covenants* (testaments) made by God with people. To avoid this confusion, we shall use the names, the old and new covenants.

The old covenant is the covenant made by God with the children of Israel through Moses. It is called *old* because it has been replaced by a *new* covenant through Jesus Christ. God operates now through the new covenant, and the old covenant is not valid anymore (Heb.8:13). This is a very important thing to know when we interpret the Bible, because we need to know what is



applicable to us, that is, not what was applicable under the old covenant but what is applicable under the new covenant.

Please note that I am not saying that the Old Testament part of the Bible is no longer relevant! The Old Testament has a great historical value because it talks of things under the old covenant out of which came the new covenant. The OT has many things to teach us about God, and His ways of dealing with people. We also see that God's revelation of Himself has been progressive from the time of creation to the setting up of the new covenant. We will miss a lot of understanding about God if we omit the Old Testament part of the Bible.

The old covenant was made for Israel (Exo.34:27). We must remember that these children of Israel were taken out of Egypt after 430 years of stay there, mostly as slaves. Their knowledge of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was

minimal, and they were more acquainted with the gods of Egypt. It was not just for the benefit of the Egyptians but also for Israel that God dealt with the so-called powers of the Egyptian gods in the ten plagues that He sent just before the flight of Israel from Egypt. We can say that Israel, at this time, was new to an actual experience with God. God tried to build up their confidence in Him by saving them from the army of Egypt, dividing the Red Sea for them to walk across on dry ground, providing them manna from heaven, water from the rock, etc. Finally, at Mount Sinai, He made His covenant with them.

God gave them the Law, built around the Ten Commandments, and asked them to keep it. He told them that if they kept it, He would bless them in many ways, but if they did not keep it they would receive many curses from Him (Deut.28). In other words, this was a covenant based on their performance. God knew, of course, that they would not be able to

keep the Law, neither they nor anybody else for that matter (Rom.3:20). And when they failed again and again, even after repeated warnings through prophets, discipline from God and repentance from their side, and they were convinced that they were unable to keep the Law, God brought in the new covenant through Jesus Christ. This was actually promised through the prophets, e.g., Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel 36.

The new covenant is based on God's grace, His unmerited favour that He shows to us without any expectation of anything we ought to do. This is not based on our performance, but given freely as a gift from God that we have to only receive humbly. He accepts and justifies us freely, in whatever condition we are, when we go to Him acknowledging our sins and placing our trust in Jesus. After that He Himself begins transforming us into His character through the power of the Holy Spirit working in us, as we cooperate with Him

and submit to Him. We can see that this new covenant is entirely different from the old covenant in the way it works. Now the old covenant has been replaced by the new one, and become known as the *old* covenant (Heb.8:13).

Given, as it were, to a spiritually developing people, the old covenant terms were suited for beginners or spiritual children. The commandments were addressed mostly at external behaviour, and the blessings and curses also related to the earthly life (related to prosperity, wealth and health or poverty, sickness and trouble). But the *new* covenant is a far *better* covenant, based on better promises (Heb.8:6). Jesus introduced this covenant (which came into effect with His death and resurrection) by saying that what the people had heard earlier from the old covenant was being given much deeper meaning. For example, if it was forbidden to kill someone in the old covenant, Jesus said that acting out in

anger was essentially the same (Matt.5:21,22). If they were not to commit physical adultery under the old covenant, under the new covenant even gazing at a woman with lust would be considered as adultery (Matt.5:27,28). In other words, under the new covenant, matters were taken deeper, to the level of the heart or the spirit, which is what God is really interested in (1Sam.16:7; Prov.4:23). (However, in telling us about a much higher level of life than what the old covenant prescribed, God was not leaving us helpless but giving us the Holy Spirit to live in us as our Helper.)

The blessing of the new covenant moved from earthly prosperity, wealth and health to spiritual well-being and transformation into the character of Jesus (Rom.12:2;Col.3:1,2;Rom.8:28,29). God still guarantees that He will provide all that we *need* for our earthly life when we seek Him first in our life (Matt.6:33). But Jesus did not promise His disciples a comfortable, trouble-free life on earth,

but instead said that we would have problems in this life (Jn.16:33), and promised that He would never leave nor forsake us (Heb.13:5). The peace that He would give us is not as the world gives—an escape from problems—but His peace in the midst of the problems (Jn.14:27). His main goal with us is to transform our inner man into His character, and He causes all things to work together for this. What is needed for this transformation is sometimes hardship and challenges.

Now we can see how dangerous it would be for us to take promises that were given to the people of Israel under the old covenant and apply them to us literally. Under the new covenant we are not promised material prosperity, freedom from trouble or sickness, triumph over our enemies on the earth, etc. Imagine the damage it can do to our faith if we expect such kind of promises to work in our lives and then find out in real life that it is not so!

“I will put none of the diseases on you which I have put on the Egyptians; for I, the Lord, am your healer” (Exo.15:26). Apart from the fact that the first part of this verse places a condition of obedience to all the commandments, this was a promise to the people of Israel as they were leaving Egypt. We do recognise that it is the Lord who is our healer, even when we get healed through medical aid. However we cannot say that we would never get sick, because it is not promised to us in the new covenant teachings. Even though the apostles did heal many people miraculously as a part of the evangelistic efforts, there were sometimes believers who were sick, like Epaphroditus (Php.2:25-27), Timothy (1Tim.5:23), and possibly Paul himself (2Cor.12:7-9). This is not to say that God never heals any child of His miraculously these days, but only that it is not promised as a matter of course for everyone. Also, on the practical side, we see that even the godliest people among

us die when the body stops functioning (a result of sickness), and no one is translated to heaven (before the rapture) like Enoch or Elijah!

One guideline which we can use for appropriating any old covenant promise for ourselves is to see if that promise is repeated, confirmed or taught under the new covenant.

We know that the rituals of sacrifices and prohibition of unclean food under the old covenant which were meant for Israel are no longer applicable for us Christians. These were essentially a shadow of the things to come, and when Christ came and fulfilled all those sacrifices by one sacrifice of Himself, all of them became obsolete (Heb.7:26,27). All divisions into clean and unclean food ceased when Jesus declared everything to be clean for us (Mk.7:18,19).

A similar change occurred when the religious festivals of the Jews gave way



for a continuous celebration for the Christians. We no longer celebrate the feasts of Passover, Tabernacles, or such Jewish special days. In the new covenant we are not duty bound to celebrate any religious festival (Col.2:16,17). 'Christian' festivals such as Christmas, New Year and Easter are essentially man made, and even though there is no ban from God's side to celebrating special days as unto Him (Rom.14:5,6), as long as it is done in order to honour God, it is not as if we *have to*.

Even when it came to the commandments, the weak commandments in the old covenant that pertained mostly to the external behaviour gave way to the more perfect standards of the new covenant where the focus shifted to the condition of the inner man. Two examples that Jesus gave illustrate this point. He said that while the old covenant commanded people not to commit murder, the new covenant would address sinning by hating others in the

heart (Matt.5:21,22). It would be obvious that if there was no hatred in the heart, there would not be any murder also. In another example, Jesus said that while the law only prohibited the physical act of adultery, God really wanted purity in the heart. In that case, even looking at a woman with desire in the heart would be tantamount to adultery in the heart (Matt.5:27,28). In other words, the new covenant standards address the core of the issue of sin as well as the place of transformation. When God transforms us in our inner man, our external behaviour will automatically change accordingly.

So we can see that the new covenant life is really what God wants from people, and thus is the ultimate goal to which the old covenant was just a pointer. In other words, the old covenant was made as a stepping stone leading towards the new covenant at the right time. Let us look at a few more areas where the new covenant fulfils the old in the core.

God gave Israel the law regarding Sabbath (Exo.20:8), as the fourth of the Ten Commandments. However, it was a special covenant with Israel (Lev.24:8), and not automatically applicable to everyone else. When the early Christians stopped the practice of meeting together every Saturday (as the Jews did), and started meeting together on Sundays (or on the first day of the week, as they called it), it was not as if Sunday became the Christian Sabbath on which Christians were not to do any work for themselves. There is no such requirement under the new covenant. If any doctor or an emergency worker has to work on a Sunday it is not that they should be put to death. Sabbath itself has taken on a new meaning under the new covenant (Col.2:16,17).

The old covenant Sabbath was patterned according to the way God worked when He created all the world. He worked for six days and 'rested' on the seventh day. Under the old covenant the Israelites

were not do any work for themselves on the Sabbath day, and anyone found doing so would be put to death. But there was no restriction on their carrying out their businesses during the rest of the days. If we understand that under the new covenant we are not to do our own will at any time on any day but only the will of God, every day would be a Sabbath day for us. God talks of the new covenant Sabbath as ‘ceasing from our own works’ and entering into God’s rest (Heb.4:9,10). It is God’s calling for us to live perpetually in that rest. Now we see that it is not a matter of keeping one day (Sunday) as a day of physical rest which is devoted to God for worshipping Him. I am not saying that there is anything wrong if we do this. But we must not lose sight of the goal of entering into and remaining in a life of doing God’s will.

Another change that has taken place is in the way we spend money or our income. Tithing, or giving a tenth of our income to God, actually came much before the

old covenant was established. We read of Abraham giving a tenth of the spoil of war to Melchizedek. When people gave their obligatory ten per cent to God, they were actually free to spend the remaining money according to their own interests. But when we come under the new covenant, we become entirely God's, because He has redeemed us from Satan's hands by paying the price of redemption in the form of the blood of Jesus. Now all that we are, and all that we have belong to God entirely. God has the right to ask us to give away all our money if He so chooses. In fact, Jesus asked a rich young ruler to do just that. Even when He does not ask every one of us to sell off everything in order to follow Him, we must not forget that He is now the owner of everything He has given to us under a stewardship. (Some people point out the fact that Jesus taught people to tithe in the New Testament (Matt.23:23). We must remember that even though it is recorded

in the NT, it was meant for people under the old covenant law, because the new covenant had not yet come but came only with the death of Christ!)

In such a scenario, the tithe loses its significance. The New Testament teaching does not lay down any percentage for giving, but encourages us to give cheerfully (2Cor.9:7), abundantly (v.6), systematically (1Cor.16:2) and secretly (Matt.6:3,4). There is no punishment for not giving, even though we will miss the blessing of giving (Acts.20:35).

To repeat, when we look at the old covenant we can learn what it signified to the people of Israel. To see what is applicable to us now, we must see what the New Testament teaches about it. The new covenant way is not about following any written law, but to be led by the Spirit of God (Rom.8:2,14).

## Chapter 7

### Context

One of the most important things to consider, apart from all that we have already looked at, is the context in which a verse occurs. Unfortunately, many Christians who have been told about the divine (verbal and plenary) inspiration of the Bible, infallibility and inerrancy, tend to take each sentence in the Bible as standalone truth, irrespective of where it occurs. Let us look at some common mistakes.

Isaiah 53 (NASB)

- <sup>1</sup> Who has believed our message? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?
- <sup>2</sup> For He grew up before Him like a tender shoot, And like a root out of parched ground; He has no *stately* form or majesty That we should look upon Him, Nor appearance that we should be attracted to Him.
- <sup>3</sup> He was despised and forsaken of men, A man of sorrows and

acquainted with grief; And like one  
from whom men hide their face He  
was despised, and we did not  
esteem Him.

4 Surely our griefs He Himself bore,  
And our sorrows He carried; Yet  
we ourselves esteemed Him  
stricken, Smitten of God, and  
afflicted.

5 But He was pierced through for our  
transgressions, He was crushed for  
our iniquities; The chastening for  
our well-being *fell* upon Him, And  
by His scourging we are healed.

6 All of us like sheep have gone astray,  
Each of us has turned to his own  
way; But the LORD has caused the  
iniquity of us all To fall on Him.

7 He was oppressed and He was  
afflicted, Yet He did not open His  
mouth; Like a lamb that is led to  
slaughter, And like a sheep that is  
silent before its shearers, So He did  
not open His mouth.

8 By oppression and judgment He was  
taken away; And as for His  
generation, who considered That  
He was cut off out of the land of  
the living For the transgression of



my people, to whom the stroke *was due?*

9 His grave was assigned with wicked men, Yet He was with a rich man in His death, Because He had done no violence, Nor was there any deceit in His mouth.

10 But the LORD was pleased To crush Him, putting *Him* to grief; If He would render Himself *as* a guilt offering, He will see *His* offspring, He will prolong *His* days, And the good pleasure of the LORD will prosper in His hand.

11 As a result of the anguish of His soul, He will see *it and* be satisfied; By His knowledge the Righteous One, My Servant, will justify the many, As He will bear their iniquities.

12 Therefore, I will allot Him a portion with the great, And He will divide the booty with the strong; Because He poured out Himself to death, And was numbered with the transgressors; Yet He Himself bore the sin of many, And interceded for the transgressors.

If we take a portion of v.5, “And by His scourging we are healed,” or “with His stripes we are healed” (KJV), and use it as text to prove that physical healing from sickness is a part of the atonement which is to be claimed by every child of God, we go astray. If we read the whole passage it should become clear that the entire focus is on Jesus dying for our sins, and it is spiritual healing that is being addressed here.

Somebody might point out that Matthew says that the miraculous healings that Jesus did were a proof of this promise (Isa.53:4) that “He Himself took our infirmities and carried away our diseases” (Matt.8:17). But what Matthew actually says is, “This was to *fulfill* what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet.” If we look at the way Matthew tries in his narrative to show that Jesus is the Messiah that the prophets were speaking about, we can understand that he was only trying to say that Jesus was the One Isaiah was talking about.

If we have a doubt about what this verse could actually mean, what we need to do is to examine the new covenant teachings to see if that concept is taught there. While we do see there accounts of many being healed miraculously, we do not find anything that teaches us that we now have right to expect complete healing for every sickness because Jesus has suffered for us. On the contrary, there is plenty of teaching on how Jesus came to save us from our sins. We can now understand how this misuse of a sentence out of context can cause such a lot of confusion among people.

### 3 John

1 The elder to the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth.

2 Beloved, I pray that in all respects you may prosper and be in good health, just as your soul prospers.

To anyone who reads this in a normal way it is clear that this is a letter to an

individual called Gaius, and that the second verse is just a form of greetings and good wishes. But for some people, “in all respects you may prosper,” has become a proof text for the ‘prosperity gospel’. They look at this as a promise from God which He has given in His word! Several different misunderstandings are involved in that particular assumption.

Matthew 5:39. “Whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also.” If we look at this sentence alone and also remember that this is directly coming from Jesus, it might appear to us as if Jesus is giving us a command to follow. But as a wise guy has pointed out, only a left handed person can normally slap us on our right cheek, and so our need for obeying this will be very rare! But the fact that Jesus did not mean this to be obeyed is clear from the fact that Jesus reacted in a very different way when He was struck by someone (Jn.18:22,23). If we look at the context

we will see that this statement occurs along with some other unrealistic 'commands' (Matt.5:38-42). If we look at the overall passage and look beyond the words to the implied meaning we can see that Jesus was teaching us the attitude of bearing with injustice when we come across some unreasonably evil people, and not giving us commands to be strictly obeyed.

“Go and sell all you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me” (Mk.10:21). Jesus said this to a rich young ruler who had a great love for money, and not to everyone in general. We see that the letters to the churches do not tell us all to follow this practice. We can also imagine what would happen at a practical level if every single one of us were to obey that! In the early days of the church some people like Barnabas sold off their properties and laid the money before the apostles, possibly believing that Jesus was going to come

back very soon. We also see that this practice was not continued for much longer.

“And after he brought them out, he said, ‘Sirs, what must I do to be saved?’ They said, ‘Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household’ (Acts.16:30,31). This was a question from the jailer in Philippi about the way he could be saved, and the answer was that salvation was through believing in Jesus—for all people, including him and his family members. Can this be a general promise from God that when someone believes in Jesus, his family members were also going to get saved? Certainly the family members now get the opportunity to hear the gospel and see this person’s transformation with their own eyes. But they themselves have to put their faith in Jesus before they can be saved, and there is no promise that one man’s faith can save his family too.

We have already seen the statement from the Bible, “There is no God.” We must have laughed when we also saw that the verse says, “The fool has said in his heart, ‘There is no God’” (Psa.14:1). All such examples illustrate the point that we need to read the Bible intelligently and not take verses from here and there blindly. Sometimes the immediate context (what comes immediately before and after) is sufficient to help us to understand the true meaning of any text. But in some cases we may also need to look at the rest of the book, the context of the book itself, and what the rest of the Bible, especially the new covenant teachings have to say.

When we hear a preacher quoting from the Bible, whatever reputation he may have, we need to take the caution of checking in our Bible what he says, whether it is the full verse and whether it means in the context of the Bible passage what he says. If we want to understand what a particular verse is

intended to mean for us, one simple thing we can do is to see what the verses before and after are talking about. This helps us to get to the immediate context of the sentence. We can also look at the bigger passage within a chapter, the chapter itself and its relevance within the book. Another helpful thing is to look at the cross-references for this verse (which are usually given in study Bibles in the centre or side of the page). These references will lead us to know what other parts of the Bible have to say in relation to this verse, and that will help us to get better clarity about God's teach on the subject. This is a good habit which can save us from a lot of error (Acts.17:11).



## Chapter 8

### Understanding the Bible

Remember the words of Jesus that He deliberately spoke many things so that everyone *would not* understand what He was saying (Mt.13:10-17)! Many times He invited *those who had ears to hear* to hear what He was saying, recognising that not everyone would understand. It is only those who have been born again and belong to the kingdom of God who can really 'see' the things of the kingdom (Jn.3:3). Many unbelievers whose minds are set against God find the Bible a closed book with nothing in it that interests them (2Cor.4:4).

But it does not mean that ordinary people cannot get anything from the Bible. Many times it is when people read portions of the Bible that God speaks to them and they get converted and receive the new birth. Or it may be that it is when people hear the gospel preached to

them orally or in a written form that their heart begins to open up and respond to the truth. But then, even after becoming children of God, they can understand only the easier aspects of the truth at first, like being able to drink only milk. The apostle Paul could not talk to the Christians in the church in Corinth as to spiritual men but as to babies in Christ (1Cor.3:1,2). But he talked to mature people things that contained spiritual wisdom (1Cor.2:6).

This teaches us that there are different levels of truth available in the Bible, and the more mature we become, the deeper the Holy Spirit helps us to go into the word. However many times we may have read a portion of the Bible before, the next time we read it, it is possible to find something new and fresh over there, and the closer we can get to God. That is why many mature people of God who have read many books and learned many things that many others have no clue about, choose the Bible as the one book

they would like to be with as their close companion.

It is the work of the Holy Spirit to reveal God and His truths from the Bible to us because He is the one who inspired the writing in the first place. Even when unbelievers read God's word the Holy Spirit is working on their minds to help them to open up and understand what God wants to tell them. To put it in a different way, this means that the Holy Spirit has been given in order to help us to be able to get to what the Lord is trying to tell us through His word. If we try to interpret the Bible using our intelligence and knowledge of Hebrew and Greek but without depending on the Holy Spirit, we can miss what God is trying to tell us, even while developing impressive sermon material! When we submit to God, the Holy Spirit can help us to understand what God is trying to speak to us through His word, even though it appears to be obscure to us at the natural level.

If we have to understand the meaning of any verse, we would need to understand the relevance of the verse in the passage where it occurs. To understand the meaning of that passage itself, we need to have an overall understanding of the whole book. And then, when we have understood that, we can get a better view of its relevance if we know what the other books of the Bible have to say about it.

When you plan to start studying the Bible for the first time, choose a book to start with, such as Genesis, Matthew, Luke or John. The next thing is to read that whole book in one sitting, if possible, using an easy to read version of the Bible or a paraphrase. You may wish to repeat this once or twice more, as this will help you to understand the tone of the book itself, and its overall theme. Then you can go on to do the same thing with the other books of the Bible. Once you have covered the whole Bible in this fashion you can start a detailed study of

the Bible on a verse by verse basis using a word for word or thought for thought translation.

The following steps may be useful for a serious study of God's word by 'ordinary' Christians (meaning those who are not Bible scholars).

1. Ask God to open our eyes as we read His word, and to reveal to us what He wants to tell us.
2. As we read a passage of the Bible, look for the plain meaning of the text first. If we do not understand the meaning of any critical words in the passage, we may need to find their meanings before we can understand the passage. Obviously what we would do first is to look up the meaning in a dictionary. We can then look for answers for the 5 W and 1 H questions, viz., Who? What? When? Where? Why? How? In addition, we could also

try to understand key words of the Bible, such as faith, grace, law, etc., by looking up how the Bible commonly uses the word in other parts of the Bible, using a concordance (which lists words in an alphabetical order and gives the references of places where the same word is used). For more in depth studies, or when the meaning is still obscure, we can use Bible dictionaries, commentaries and also check with other translations. (I would recommend that the use of commentaries should be taken up *only after* we have done our own study, in order to avoid taking up truths second hand and missing out direct contact with God.)

3. See the immediate context of the verses we are reading. We should see a few verses before and after the verse we are reading in order to understand the position of this

verse with respect to the passage in which it comes. Sometimes it may be necessary to expand this coverage to the whole chapter or the whole book if we would like to get a better understanding of the truth.

4. Understand what literary style is being used so that we may interpret the sentences in a proper way.
5. If the passage is from the Old Testament, see how it is relevant to us under the New Testament.
6. If the passage is a historical narrative, recognise what lessons we can learn from it, while noting that it may not necessarily be for us to imitate.
7. Ask what we can ‘take away’ from the passage—what He has spoken to us personally, and what we have learned from this passage in terms of some understanding about God, His

ways and about ourselves, something for us to obey, something for us to keep as a goal to reach, and something we need to change in our thinking or behaviour. We may wish to write this down in order to look at it again some other time.

8. Determine to do (or apply) what God has told us to do, realising that if we are not interested in doing, but only in satisfying our curiosity, there is no guarantee that we would receive the proper understanding of His teaching (Jn.7:17). This application may mean a change in our thinking, attitude or behaviour. If we see something clearly but do not do accordingly, we may be deceiving ourselves with mere head knowledge (Jas.1:22-25). Jesus warned us clearly the big difference between doing what



we hear and merely hearing (Matt.7:24-27).

9. Thank God for speaking to us, and ask Him to help us to remember what we have learned, apply it in our life, and to transform our lives with this new knowledge.

### ***Logos and rhema***

There are two words used in the Greek New Testament to refer to the words of God, viz., *logos* and *rhema*. Sometimes *logos* is used to refer to the Word of God which is the Son of God who became flesh, and most other times to the written words of God. *Rhema*, on the other hand, is used to specifically refer to words spoken directly by God to someone. In fact, this is the word used in Romans 10:17 where we see that it is when we hear the word spoken to us in our heart that we receive faith.

When we read the Bible what we subjectively meet at first is *logos*, which is the word we find written there. But then, as we read it God may impress some truth from that word on our heart, which then becomes the *rhema* word for us. Even at other times, when we are not actually reading the Bible, God may bring to our heart something that we have read earlier in such a way that gives us an assurance that God is speaking directly to us. God may also speak to us directly in our hearts other things (which are not written in the Bible but which are not contrary to the Bible), such as He did with other people in history (Acts.8:26; 9:6,11).

One thing that is perplexing to our intellect is how God sometimes speaks to us in special situations using words from the Bible to convey to us a meaning that cannot be understood ordinarily from those words. For example, God may sometimes speak to someone saying, “by His stripes you are

healed,” seeking to give him faith for physical healing in that specific situation. Sometimes God assures a new believer that his family is also going to be saved, using Acts 16:30,31, “And he brought them out and said, ‘Sirs, what must I do to be saved?’ So they said, ‘Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household.’” This is not a general statement promising salvation of one’s family members when one believes in the Lord. But sometimes God does give such a promise to someone even though it is not applicable universally.

Of course, it is to be understood that this kind of special application is not meant for making a doctrine for everyone else or even for this same person at all times. One common mistake is to assume that if God did something for someone else, He will do the same thing for us too. It looks as if God uses this kind of means sometimes to talk to a person and to give him an assurance which may be

otherwise difficult for that person to receive without such means. But many times it happens that this person misunderstands the special nature of this communication and makes a doctrine of it for all people.

Since there is a lot of subjectivity in this type of *rhema* words, where we can make mistakes by assuming that God was telling us something when it was our own thoughts or sometimes even suggestions from demons, we need to take extra steps to confirm whether we have heard rightly from God. We can do this by checking with the written word of God to see if there is any contradiction between what we seem to have heard from God and what He has revealed in His written word. Since God will not contradict Himself, this is a safe check for us. Another thing is to consult with more mature Christians to find out if there is anything we may have missed or overlooked. Finally, if we have heard God correctly, our circumstances will

also begin to fall in place in line with this word. As we become more mature and experienced in dealing with God we will be able to recognise God's voice better and become able to trust Him as He leads us even when there is no external corroboration.

## **Chapter 9**

### **Conclusion**

The Bible is a precious gift from God to us. He has revealed Himself to us through this book in a way that would have been impossible for man to discover by his own research or investigation. We know from the Bible about His love and His plan of salvation for sinners, how we can know Him, walk with Him and have fellowship with Him when He speaks to us in our hearts through His word and through the Holy Spirit.

Many godly people have come to recognise that the Bible is like no other book on earth. Even though they have read many other interesting books including those written by godly people, there is nothing they would like to spend time with as much as with the Bible.

Now the Bible is available in plenty, and in different forms (paper and electronic,

written and audio) and styles of translation. But God is not the only one trying to speak to us through the Bible. Satan and his demons will also like to use words from the Bible to misguide us. Even though high intelligence or high education is not what qualifies us for understanding the Bible rightly, we have no excuse if we do not use our common sense in the process of interpretation, especially when we know that there is possibility of misinterpretation.

The Bible has been given to us primarily so that through it we can get to know God personally (Jn.5:39,40). In all our study of the Bible we must not forget this, and we must not allow ourselves to be bogged down with less important details.

We know that sometimes God works beyond these rules through His Spirit to speak to some of His children individually. This is exceptional and not to be expected as a regular experience.

This does not mean that rules of interpretation are unnecessary or to be ignored. These rules tell us how interpretation is to be made in the normal case. But in particular cases God is sovereign in using whatever means He chooses to reach out to His children in ways they can receive.

This book is presented with a hope that it will cause many people to sit up and think seriously about how they read and interpret the Bible as they read it for themselves, read from books or listen to preachers. Those who are teachers in the church have a special responsibility to make such guidelines known to everyone so that many unnecessary errors can be avoided. May God's word be lifted up over all the confusion that prevails these days.



## **About the author**

Jacob Ninan (b. 1948), has master's degrees in engineering, and counselling and psychotherapy. He retired in 2008 from the Indian Space Research Organisation as the Programme Director for international cooperation. He met with Jesus while studying in Bangalore in 1972, and from then onwards has been an ardent student of the Bible, reading hundreds of Christian books, listening to hundreds of messages, and being very active in the church in speaking, counselling, writing, editing, etc. He runs the 'Comfort & Counsel' web site ([www.c-n-c.org](http://www.c-n-c.org)) where he has published a large number of articles on practical Christian life and counsel. With advanced training in Christian counselling, he has been counselling individuals and couples, and also facilitating in counselling training programmes for many years. Jacob Ninan joined the editorial board of the Christian magazine Light of Life in

2008, and is currently contributing as editor, writer and web master. Jacob Ninan has been married to Susan for 38 years. They stay in Bangalore, and they have five grown up children and six grandchildren.

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