

**GRACE BIBLE TRAINING CENTRE (GBTC)**  
**SCHOOL OF MINISTRY**  
**ARUSHA - TANZANIA**

**SUBJECT: BIBLE STUDY METHODS**

**LESSON 2: GUIDES TO UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE**

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Psalms 119:130 – *“The entrance of Your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple”.*

There are rules that are essential for the effective study and understanding of the Bible. The following are the most important ones to adopt.

### **2.1 Use of Context**

The context of a scriptural portion includes all that surrounds it. The verses, paragraphs, and chapters before and after a text make up its immediate context. The extended context consists of that portion of Scripture less closely related to the passage and may embrace paragraphs, a chapter, or even an entire book of Scripture.

Use of context to interpret Scripture will help to prepare lessons and sermons that are true to biblical truth.

Errors in doctrine and practice are made when a single verse of Scripture is taken out of context and given the wrong meaning. So-called “proof texts” often are passages of Scripture taken out of setting and used to “prove” something someone wants to believe.

The Bible warns that ignorant and unstable people may give false explanations of Scripture (2 Peter 3:16) and encourages those who minister to seek God’s approval by correctly teaching the message of God’s truth (2 Timothy 2:15).

#### **2.1.1 Context Illustrated**

As a single thread does not show all the pattern of a cloth material, so a single verse of Scripture does not give all the meaning of truth. However, as with embroidery in a cloth material, the full pattern of truth is seen when all the threads of Scripture are properly woven together.

When one uses the context, the Bible is the best interpreter of its own truths. This is commonly called “the analogy of faith.”

Let us see how the context can be used to interpret Scripture.

Read the Parable of the Weeds in Matthew 13:24–30. Notice that when the crowd left, Jesus explained the parable to His disciples. Now read the context (Matthew 13:36–43) for Jesus’ interpretation of the parable. Most parables are self-explanatory if you pay careful attention to the context.

A detailed account of Jesus’ visit to Jerusalem for the Feast of Shelters is given in John 7:10–39. On the last day of the feast Jesus stood up and cried with a loud voice, ‘Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him’” (v. 38). These words are explained in the context by John, the inspired author: “By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified” (v. 39). The explanation given by the context is the correct interpretation because the writer states this directly in the Scripture.

### **2.1.2 Words Defined by Context**

The context can be helpful in finding the meaning of words. We must be careful to let the context of a word determine its meaning and importance because the context of a word limits its meaning and keeps it from being interpreted in more than one sense.

Mark 12:18 tells about the beliefs of the Sadducees: “Then the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to him with a question.” This was the basis of their question to Jesus Christ as expressed in Mark 12:19–23. Acts 23:8 amplifies this information and includes a statement about the beliefs of the Pharisees.

### **2.2 Use of Setting**

The Scriptures are better understood if you know the setting of the writing or speech. Nearly every utterance Jesus made was a response to circumstances. His teaching on the new birth was an answer to the inner need of a religious man (John 3:1–21). His dialogue or talk on the “Water of Life” was given by a well to a spiritually thirsty woman (John 4:1–30). When the disciples returned from the Samaritan village, Jesus was prompted to instruct them about food and the will of God (John 4:31–35) and the need for labourers in the harvest (John 4:36–38). In each instance the setting is important to full understanding of the teaching.

Jesus’ teaching on lost things (sheep, coin, a son) in Luke 15:4–32 can be better understood when you know the circumstances that prompted His stories. Luke introduced this teaching by saying, “Now the tax collectors and ‘sinners’ were all gathering around to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, ‘This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.’ Then Jesus told them this parable” (Luke 15:1–3).

The attitude of the shepherd, the woman, and the father toward lost things is in sharp contrast to the attitude of the Pharisees and teachers of the Law. However, the anger of the elder son toward his forgiven brother is a perfect example of the attitude of the Pharisees toward the sinners Jesus forgave.

## 2.3 Use of Literal and Figurative Language

### 2.3.1 Literal Language

The *literal* meaning of language is the natural or normal way it is used. It follows the ordinary sense of the words. In Scripture, this means that the words have ordinary meanings.

The Bible is not written in a secret code. The Holy Spirit often gives an enriched meaning to a language, but this does not mean that the basic meaning of the words has been altered.

In Mark 8:27, we are told that Jesus and His disciples went away to the villages near Caesarea Philippi; it means that there were villages in that area and that they did visit them. This is the literal meaning of Scripture. It means what it plainly says.

There is no reason to doubt that Eden, Adam and Eve, Noah, Jonah, the nation of Israel, the church, or the New Jerusalem are literal persons, places, and things.

The literal language of Scripture is not difficult to understand.

In general, the Bible can be taken at face value to mean what it says in the normal way that language is usually understood. God revealed it to man to be a source of information to him, not to conceal truth from him. Only when the language used is obviously not literal should one seek a figurative meaning.

### 2.3.2 Figurative Language

Language can also be used in a *figurative* way. Figurative means the expression of one thing to mean something else. Figurative language is used to explain a thing by picturing something to which it can be compared. It presents pictures to the mind that illustrate other ideas. This is a perfectly proper use of language and is illustrated in John 7:38. In this verse Jesus says, "*He who believes in me, as the Scriptures has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.*" This is a picture painted by Jesus Christ of a person with streams of water pouring from his heart. John provided a meaning of this in John 7:39 of the work that the Holy Spirit will do in a person who believes in Jesus Christ.

In the Bible, God is presented as a *rock*, a *fortress*, and a *shield*. Israel is referred to as a *vineyard*, a good man as a *tree flourishing by the riverside*, and the devil as a *roaring lion* who goes about to seize its prey.

Figurative language is common in all cultures as a medium of communication that adds understanding.

The Bible uses for its teaching word pictures drawn from everyday life in the home and from the countryside. This makes it possible to relate the Word to ordinary human interests. Thus the Bible truth makes an impression on the mind and can be easily remembered.

### 2.3.3 Literal versus Figurative Language – John 3:1-8; 6:48-59

Figures of speech are scattered throughout the Bible and are not always easy to detect and understand. How can one tell if a passage is figurative or literal?

Here is the simple rule: *Scripture must be taken literally whenever possible; it is figurative only if it cannot be accepted as literal.* Context and common sense will help to decide whether a given passage is literal or figurative. Even figurative language conveys a literal truth.

To understand figurative language we should examine the way it is used in Scripture and we need to study carefully the background of both Old and New Testaments. Only in this way can we understand the figures of speech that are used.

One of the most common figures of speech is the simile. Similes are expressed comparisons of two different things or ideas in which something is said to be “like” or “as” something. See Psalm 103:13–16 and Proverbs 26:14 (NKJV) for examples.

Nicodemus was puzzled when Jesus said that a man must be born again to see the kingdom of God (John 3:1–8). His response was, “*How can a man be born when he is old? . . . Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb to be born!*” (verse 4). Jesus was using figurative language, but Nicodemus was taking Him literally.

A similar thing happened with the woman of Samaria: she thought Jesus was referring to water from Jacob’s well when He talked about life-giving water (John 4:7–15).

Sometimes people create problems by taking figurative expressions literally. When Jesus referred to His flesh as bread, the crowd argued (John 6:48–52). They asked, “*How can this man give us his flesh to eat?*” (verse 52). Jesus then referred to His flesh as food and His blood as drink. At this, many of His disciples stopped following Him because the saying was hard to understand (John 6:60–66).

Common sense would tell you (even if the context did not) that Jesus would not literally feed them His flesh and give them His blood to drink. Peter understood this. When the crowd went away he expressed his confidence that Jesus’ words gave eternal life (John 6:66–69). Even today among some believers there is misunderstanding on this matter. Some say that the bread and wine of Communion become literally the blood and body of the Lord Jesus.

The fact is that Jesus was speaking figuratively, teaching us that through the suffering He would endure in His body and the shedding of His blood on the Cross, spiritual life would be provided to humanity.

### 2.3.4 Human Language Has Limitations

Every coin has two sides. On one side, the Bible is understandable to ordinary people because it is written in ordinary language. But on the other side, how can an *infinite* (limitless) God explain infinite truth to *finite* (limited) man?

Since man is finite, his language is also finite or limited. We say that God has accommodated Himself to man. That is, He has put spiritual truth in as simple a form as possible so we can understand some of it. You cannot understand everything there is to understand about God. But, you can understand the things that are important for you to know.

## **2.4 Understanding Progressive Revelation – *Job 11:7-9; Ephesians 1:15-19; Psalms 103:13-14***

God has always accommodated the limitations of man and his sinful condition in His dealings with man. The story of the Bible opens with Adam and Eve in the presence of God in the Garden of Eden. Their sin resulted in banishment from God's presence. That separation from God was, and is, very deep and far-reaching.

Man was sealed in a prison of his five senses. Nothing seemed real to him unless he could see it, touch it, taste it, feel it, or hear it. Sin had cut him off from God. Over time, the infinite love and patience of God and His Spirit worked slowly into the consciousness of men.

The Israelites had to be chosen as a living object lesson. The law had to be given. God's plan had to be worked out over long years of history. He had to find special men like Abraham and Moses who were sensitive to His voice. He sent prophets to preach His words. Finally, "*when the fullness of time had come*" (Galatians 4:4, ESV) God sent His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. By His death on the cross, Jesus made a bridge for man to come to God once again.

Through all of this, God was giving man more and more information about Himself.

This had to be progressive information for two reasons:

- (1) The human mind could only take in so much truth at a time, and
- (2) Sin had made man morally unable to contact God.

Isaiah understood this when he said that teaching had to be given, "line upon line, line upon line, here a little, there a little" (Isaiah 28:10, ESV). Because of progressive revelation the Redeemer God is seen more clearly in the New Testament than in the Old Testament.

## **2.5 Scripture Interprets Scripture**

"Scripture is its own best commentary." What this means is that when a passage of Scripture seems difficult, one should try to find other Scripture that sheds light on it. The first place to look is in its immediate context.

*Context* simply means "*all the words around a passage.*" Needless to say, this is where familiarity with the whole Bible comes in. Seriously digging into the Word is therefore important. The more familiar one becomes with all Scripture, the easier it will be to find verses and passages that shed light on other passages.

*Study* of Scripture is like a little stone dropped into still water. There are ever-widening circles that ripple from it: single words must be interpreted in the light of the sentence, the sentence in the light of the verse, the verse in the light of the section of the chapter to which it belongs, and so on. At the widest point, the whole Bible sheds light on its parts.

The total body of Scripture is the total context and guide for understanding any specific portion of it.

No doctrine can be based on single verses for which no other support can be found. Enough information should be provided to support the doctrine or teaching.

## **2.6 Harmony of the Whole Bible – 2Peter 1:19-21; 2Timothy 3:16-17**

One can use context to help understand the Bible. All the way from a single sentence to the whole collection of books, there is one single system of truth presented. In fact, one must use the whole system of truth to interpret any individual part of it. This is one of the convincing evidences of revelation.

The writings of so many men, over such long stretches of history, are in harmony with each other. The key, of course, is that the Holy Spirit was the true author. Men were just the instruments.

Many themes can be traced throughout the Bible, but the main one is *Redemption through Christ*. The Old Testament pointed to Him in symbols and in prophecy. The New Testament is the record of His life, death, resurrection, and ascension. Jesus said the Old Testament Scriptures taught about Him. After His resurrection, He taught two disciples on the road to Emmaus: “*And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all Scriptures the things concerning himself*” (Luke 24:27).

## **2.7 Unity in Meaning – Deuteronomy 12:32; Revelation 22:18**

Unity in meaning reminds us that Scripture does not contradict itself. We must be careful not to bring our own meanings to Scripture when trying to find proof for them.

The correct approach is to let the words speak for themselves.

As you take a Scripture and examine it thoroughly, its true meaning will emerge. It may or may not be what you expected to find. God has inspired the authors. God does not contradict Himself. Therefore, the Bible will not contradict itself. If there are passages that seem to be opposed to each other, it is because of the student’s lack of understanding or lack of information. In such cases, always reserve judgment until further light can be shed on the problem.