

April to June 2012
Teens RPG Series on
“How to Study the Bible”

Do pray for the Holy Spirit's guidance before you begin your devotional time, for unless the Spirit reveals the meaning, we cannot understand scripture (1 Corinthians 2:10). Then you must read the scripture text; please don't be tempted to read the devotional alone without reading the Bible. Memorizing the scripture text will help you meditate upon it (Psalm 1:2), even long after you have finished your devotional time. After reading the devotional, always end with self-reflection: compare yourself against the standard of God's Word, and humbly yield to the Holy Spirit to direct you towards that standard (James 1:23-25). Be ye doers of the Word, not hearers only!

At the end of this series, may you be able to say as David said "O God, thou art my God; early will I seek thee: my soul thirsteth for thee, my flesh longeth for thee in a dry and thirsty land, where no water is." (Psalm 63:1)

May all glory be God's alone!

Dn Milton Ang

On behalf of the Teens RPG committee

WHAT IS HERMENEUTICS?

According to the Far Eastern Bible College course notes on Hermeneutics, the word itself was derived from Greek and Roman mythology. Hermes (Greek) or Mercury (Roman) was the god of science, speech, writing, invention and art. He was the messenger and interpreter for the gods, conveying their message to the mortals. In a sense, that is what Hermeneutics is - attempting to convey the message of God from His word through the right interpretation of it.

More specifically, hermeneutics is defined by theologians as the science and art of the interpretation of the Bible. It is a science because it involves principles which help us interpret the Bible properly. It is also an art because it involves the skill of the interpreter with the application of these principles of Bible interpretation. Of course, as this is not just any book, but the very words of God, and so hermeneutics cannot merely be an intellectual exercise which involves the person's mind. It must also involve the person's heart because it is a spiritual exercise.

A good biblical example would be in the time of Nehemiah. Then he gave a public reading of the Word of God, followed by a interpretation of it, where he "gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading" (Neh 8:8). In a nutshell this is what Hermeneutics is!

Application - It may seem entirely logical to approach the interpretation of God's Word from a "neutral" position, meaning to study God's Word with an "open mind". However, the Lord Jesus Himself said that when spiritual things are concerned, "He that is not with me is against me..." (Mat 12:30). That means that in order to study and interpret God's Word accurately one must approach God's Word with the uttermost reverence, acknowledging that "The Bible is none other than the voice of Him that sitteth upon the Throne! Every Book of it, every chapter of it, every verse of it, every word of it, every syllable of it, every letter of it, is the direct utterance of the Most High! The Bible is none other than the Word of God: not some part of it more, some part of it less; but all alike, the utterance of Him who sitteth upon the Throne; faultless, unerring, supreme!" (Dean Burgon Oath).

THOUGHT: We should ask not if certain parts of God's Word are true but rather how we can better understand the truths of His Word.

PRAYER: Thank You, O Lord, for the gift of Your Word which delivered me from darkness into Your marvelous light.

MONDAY, APRIL 2

*Nehemiah 8:9
Memorise John 8:32*

“...and the truth shall make you free...”

WHY IS HERMENEUTICS IMPORTANT?

God’s Word is perfect, and all of it is perfectly preserved through the ages in order that man can come to know Him and the Lord Jesus Christ. Indeed, we are saved by Jesus the Living Word through the Gospel which is found in the written Word, the Bible.

But if God’s Word is perfect, then why is it that we need proper interpretation in order to get a proper understanding of it? It is not that there is a problem with God’s Word but rather it is because God’s Word is given to a fallen race of sinners whose intellect and understanding of spiritual things is imperfect. Therefore, a system of interpretation is critical in helping us to correctly grasp God’s Word. This is where hermeneutics comes in.

The principles of hermeneutics are the tools which one uses to correctly interpret the Bible. Without correct hermeneutics the Bible would be open to many different and erroneous interpretations. Obviously, this goes against the principle that the truth of God’s Word is absolute. There is no room for multiple views when it comes to the truth of God’s Word.

When the right principles are applied, and God’s truth is accurately conveyed and understood, then the power of God’s words upon His people would be readily evident. This was seen in Nehemiah’s time, for after he caused them to understand the Word, the response was that “all the people wept, when they heard the words of the law”. They were pricked in the heart by their disobedience to God, and mournfully wept tears of repentance. These are the results that one can have when right hermaneutics are applied.

Application –God’s Word and hermeneutics can be likened to a radio broadcast and a radio antenna. The signal that is being broadcast is perfectly free from error, but noise and static can result from poor reception and cause the broadcast to be unclear. However, the antenna can be used to improve reception so that the radio broadcast is clearly heard. This is somewhat like hermeneutics enabling us to interpret and understand God’s perfect inspired and preserved Word of truth more accurately.

THOUGHT: Every truth proclaimed through God’s Word is so precious that I would like to avoid misinterpreting any part of it.

PRAYER: O Lord, thank you for blessing us with sound minds and the illumination of the Holy Spirit that we can know Your Word.

TUESDAY, APRIL 3

2 Timothy 2:15
Memorise 2 Timothy 2:7

“...and the Lord giveth thee understanding in all things.”

WHAT IS THE PRIMARY AIM OF INTERPRETATION?

The aim of interpretation is simply for one to correctly understand God’s Word and also to gain a deeper understanding of it. Note how diplomats from different countries who do not speak the same language engage interpreters to help them understand each other. Obviously, the consequences of miscommunication due to misinterpretation at high-level meetings between world leaders could be serious. Just a single word misunderstood could lead to far greater consequences, possibly even that of war. World leaders recognize this and take great pains to ensure that this is avoided.

For us as Christians, we are to handle the Word of God even more carefully because the consequences are spiritual in nature and can affect us or the people around us for eternity. This is why 2 Timothy 2:15 tells us to “study to shew thyself approved unto God”. To study God’s Word is not merely to read and remember but also to diligently work at gaining a deeper and proper understanding of God’s Word, working hard at it like a labourer in the field would sweat and toil under the scorching sun. We are also told to “rightly divide” God’s Word. Dividing God’s Word can be likened to a biologist whom, having dissected his specimen scrutinizes it and documents every minute detail of what he observes under the microscope. Likewise, we are to dwell on God’s every Word and understand not just the general meaning behind Bible passages but also to know why God uses certain words, phrases and tenses in the Bible in their respective contexts. This involves much time, diligence and attention to detail. When we do so, the Bible assures us that we can be like a workman approved of God, for God takes delight in His children when they take His Word seriously, put in the effort to understand it better, and draw closer to Him.

Application –Unlike every other book ever written, the Bible stands apart and above the rest in its inerrancy, wisdom and richness. To simply be satisfied with just a superficial understanding without delving more deeply into its marvelous truths, or even worse, to misinterpret it, is to deny ourselves the best education possible. Hermeneutics is therefore the tool which can help us to this end for our spiritual benefit.

THOUGHT: The key to having the mind of Christ and a close walk with God is through studying and rightly dividing His Word.

PRAYER: Reveal to me, O Lord, the rich treasures of knowledge and wisdom hidden in Thy Word.

IS THERE ONLY ONE INTERPRETATION?

The Bible describes the Lord Jesus Christ as One who is the same yesterday, today and forever (Heb 13:8) and the Heavenly Father as One who has no variability, neither shadow of turning (Jam 1:17). Also, whatever He says stands, and stands forever. Indeed, Psalm 33:11 says, “The counsel of the LORD standeth for ever, the thoughts of his heart to all generations.”

Since God is not a God of confusion but is perfect, single-minded, wise and immutable, it logically follows that the truths which He reveals through His Word do not change with time or have double meanings that would cause confusion to those who study it. This means that there can only ever be one correct interpretation of His Word.

However, there are passages in the Bible that are difficult to interpret. Because hermeneutics is as much a science as it is an art, even the correct application of hermeneutics by faithful students of the Word can yield different results. This does not mean that there is more than one interpretation. Rather, it is a problem with imperfect and fallible interpreters who are unique individuals. They may apply the same steps of biblical hermeneutics and yield different results. Their understanding of God’s Word and interpretation of it may then differ. That is why 2 Peter 1:20-21 teaches us that interpretation of Scripture is never a private and purely intellectual endeavour, but one that is spiritual, guided by the Holy Spirit. Thus as we strive to interpret every passage rightly, we must constantly rely on the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and not our own minds and wills.

Application –Haven’t we often heard enthusiastic (and at times even heated) exchanges between sincere Bible-believing Christians who disagree with the meaning of certain passages in the Bible? The conversation often ends with both parties saying “well, that’s just your interpretation of it”. Perhaps what is necessary here is to humbly acknowledge that we need to prayerfully go back to search the scriptures more closely and ask for the Holy Spirit’s illumination, resist the tendency to take on a judgmental attitude towards those who hold differing views while still upholding the fundamental tenets of the faith.

THOUGHT: If God’s truth were to be open to man’s interpretation we would ultimately have no assurance of our salvation in Christ.

PRAYER: Thank You, Almighty God for Your absolute truths without which we would be swayed by every wind of doctrine.

THURSDAY, APRIL 5

*John 3:3
Memorise 1 Corinthians 2:14*

"But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God..."

IS REGENERATION REQUIRED TO INTERPRET?

1 Corinthians 2:14 says, "But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God..., because they are spiritually discerned." Furthermore, 2 Peter 1:21 says, "For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost" and John 4:24 says, "God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth."

These passages tell us God's Word has a spiritual origin which is God Himself. It was given to man by the Holy Spirit, making the Bible a divinely inspired book of spiritual truths. It involved human authors whom God described as "holy men", meaning these men were saved and were indwelt by the Holy Spirit. If the origin, revelation and recording of God's Word are all of a spiritual nature, it therefore follows that receiving and understanding the Word of God (interpretation) must also be a spiritual exercise. This is why 1 Corinthians 2:14 says that the natural (unsaved, spiritually unregenerate) man cannot receive the things of the Spirit of God. Without the illumination by the Holy Spirit, no person can understand, accept and conduct himself according to God's Word. One can be receptive to the Spirit's guidance only if he is indwelt by the Spirit (saved, spiritually regenerated). Likewise Jesus told Nicodemus that "except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God". To be regenerated or born again is therefore a prerequisite for the proper interpretation of God's Word.

Application –Soon after the Asian Tsunami in 2004, Dr. Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, questioned the existence of God due to the immense death and suffering resulting from it even though God had forewarned us that escalating catastrophes would occur as a sign of the soon-return of Jesus. Undoubtedly as a theologian, Dr. Williams would have been very familiar with Matthew 24 regarding the end-times. In spite of this, his reaction to the Tsunami reflected how Matthew 24 had not impacted on him at all. An unregenerate theologian will neither defend nor accept what the Bible in times of severe testing. How can he be trusted to interpret God's Word faithfully?

THOUGHT: An unregenerate person interpreting God's Word is like a doctor performing surgery with only theoretical knowledge.

PRAYER: Thy Word is power indeed, O Lord, for not only does it quicken souls but it also transforms hearts and minds.

FRIDAY, APRIL 6

*Hebrews 11:6
Memorise Jeremiah 6:20*

“...your burnt offerings are not acceptable...”

IS FAITH REQUIRED TO INTERPRET?

Hebrews 11 gives us a beautiful description of faith. It is the substance of things hoped for, and the evidence of things not seen (Heb 11:1). Faith gives us the ability to be utterly convinced that God simply spoke the world into existence by the power of His Word, therefore the physical universe which we can see and touch was created by the unseen yet very real power of God (Heb 11:3). However, we cannot truly believe these things that God had done without faith. We would not be able to wholeheartedly take God at His Word. This is why it is impossible to please God without faith (Heb 11:6).

The faithless would say “seeing is believing”. Therefore all the miracles found in the Bible are, at best, mere fairy tales with moral messages as far as these people are concerned because they cannot be explained or verified “objectively” by “science”. We would eventually have a huge problem with God’s Word because every pillar of Christianity would be subjected to interpretation from a standpoint of disbelief. This being the case, much of the Bible itself would be subjected to disbelief also. Such an approach to interpreting the Bible cannot possibly be correct. Far from leading us to the truth, we would be lead down the path to deception and damnation instead. Reason and logic are not enough to bridge the communication gap between God and man. It is therefore through faith which we understand spiritual things.

Application –Sadly, even self-professing Christians deny a literal 6 twenty-four-hour-day supernatural creation of the world because they do not believe that God is capable of such a feat. They have placed so-called expert scientific opinion above the Word of God. This is just one of many tragic outcomes of “faithless hermeneutics” which would ultimately lead to the outright denial of Christ as the sole mediator between God and man. Those of us who are “highly educated” are especially prone to this. Let us guard ourselves against such a subtle yet deadly attitude of unbelief, and take God’s Word as it is, never questioning, never doubting.

THOUGHT: To the faithless, seeing is believing. To the faithful, believing is seeing.

PRAYER: O Lord, help us that we may all walk by faith and not by sight.

SATURDAY, APRIL 7

*Proverbs 1:7
Memorise James 1:5*

“...hereby we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.”

IS FEAR OF GOD REQUIRED TO INTERPRET?

To fear God is to have a wholesome reverence for Him. The Bible tells us that only with such an attitude can we begin to attain knowledge and ultimately wisdom (Proverbs 1:7 and Psalm 111:10). Indeed, this will lead to a good understanding of His Word. Without such reverence, one would tend to handle God’s Word casually and therefore interpret it loosely and liberally.

Without fear or reverence, an interpreter would not take God’s Word seriously and would not approach it with an attitude of respect and awe. This would result in a tendency for him to inject his own thoughts and ideas into his interpretation rather than to expound its meaning in the purest and most unadulterated way.

From Proverbs 1:7 and Psalm 111:10 we learn that true knowledge and wisdom come from having such a fear and reverence. We need God’s help through the Holy Spirit for proper understanding as the things of the Lord are spiritual in nature. This means that we need spiritual guidance and to be prayerful, not just good technique or correct application of hermeneutics.

Application –It is not difficult to understand how we have this tendency to perceive something less credibly when it is told to us by someone whom we do not take seriously. It is just like a convicted drug trafficker waiting on death row being told by one of his fellow inmates that he has been spared the gallows because he has been granted a Presidential Pardon. He has little reason to believe that it is true, considering the source of the news. If, however, he receives a letter with the Presidential stamp and seal saying exactly the same thing he would be elated as he would be absolutely convinced of its truth simply because it came straight from the President himself. How much more, then, are we to take God seriously and treat His Word with fear?

THOUGHT: God’s Word, unlike man’s words, has the power to save souls and transform lives.

PRAYER: Teach me, O Lord, to always hold Your Word in highest regard and to never deny its truth at any cost.

MUST WE HAVE THE HOLY SPIRIT TO INTERPRET?

1 Corinthians 2:12 says that born-again believers receive the Spirit of God and not the spirit of the world that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God. These things are the Gospel of Jesus Christ and other spiritual truths as proclaimed by God's Word. It is the Holy Spirit which inspired holy men used by God to record Scripture. It is the Holy Spirit that quickens (revive, to make alive) the spiritually dead souls of those not born-again. Without the spiritual regeneration brought about by Him, we would all still be dead in sin.

We can understand how it is impossible to communicate with a dead person. We can speak to the person after he has breathed his last breath and not get any response at all. He is dead to the world. Likewise, it is impossible for someone who is spiritually unregenerate to perceive spiritual things. He is dead and completely unresponsive to such things, just as someone who has just died a physical death cannot respond to stimulus of any kind. How then can we expect the unregenerate to be able to interpret God's Word, which is of a spiritual nature, when they cannot even perceive spiritual truth in the first place?

Application –In Matthew 5 Jesus teaches us not only to refrain from retaliation against those who abuse us but to even pray for them. Unbelievers would not be able to understand or accept this as their instinct would be to strike back. However, genuine believers who bear the fruits of the Spirit (Gal 5:22) would exhibit longsuffering, gentleness, meekness and temperance in such situations. Only a supernatural transformation within us empowered by the Holy Spirit could enable us to conduct ourselves in this manner. Moreover, interpreters of God's Word are not just Bible students, teachers or pastors who must preach to others. Anyone, even a lay-person, interprets the Bible every time he reads it. This means that we all need the Holy Spirit's enablement to interpret God's Word and to read it with understanding.

THOUGHT: God gave us His inspired Word through the Holy Spirit. We therefore receive it through the Holy Spirit also.

PRAYER: O Lord we thank Thee for the Holy Spirit who points us to the cross of Christ, revealing it to us in Scripture.

MONDAY, APRIL 9

*John 16:13
Memorise Ephesians 1:17-19*

"The eyes of your understanding being enlightened..."

HOW DOES THE HOLY SPIRIT HELP US TO INTERPRET?

The answer to the title of today's reading is described by 2 words, 'supernatural' and 'illumination'. Yes, through the inner workings of the Holy Spirit, we who were once blind now have been given spiritual eyes that see. This affects us in every way; our value system, outlook on life, daily conduct, way of thinking and of course, the way we approach and handle the Word of God.

Ephesians 1:17-19 tells us that God gives us the spirit of wisdom and revelation, understanding and the power to believe. 1 Corinthians 2:10-14 tells us how the Holy Spirit reveals even the deep things of God to us and gives us spiritual discernment. John 16:13-15 tells us that it is the Holy Spirit which guides us to all truth, repeats what God the Father and Son has said and points us to them and to God's Word.

Indeed, Romans 11:33 says, "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!" This tells us how much we need the Holy Spirit's help in interpreting God's Word. Many parts of it are deep, reflecting the infinite nature of God, and without the Holy Spirit's guidance, we would not be able to understand anything about God.

Application –The Gospel is the most fundamental truth as proclaimed by God's Word, and yet, it is not the knowledge of the Gospel but genuine faith and belief in it that saves. If even our faith is given to us by God through the Holy Spirit which enables us to accept this basic truth, then it reasonable follows that it is through the Holy Spirit operating within us in the manner described above that helps us to discern all other spiritual truths. This is why we should always pray for the Holy Spirit to help us understand before and after reading God's Word.

THOUGHT: Illumination isn't just having a correct understanding of God's Word but must also result in an inner transformation of the interpreter.

PRAYER: Teach me, O Lord, to not just agree with Thy Word but also to be transformed anew by it.

TUESDAY, APRIL 10

Hebrews 5:13-14
Memorise 2 Peter 3:16-18

“But grow in the grace and in the knowledge of... Jesus Christ.”

MUST WE BE A “MEAT” CHRISTIAN TO INTERPRET?

The Apostle Peter warns in 2 Peter 3:16-18 that there will be those in the last days who will pervert God’s Word and lead others astray through their wrong teachings. The frightening thing is that verse 17 says that even those who are steadfast in the faith can fall victim to these false teachers and be led away by the wicked. However, there is a solution, and that is, to grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus (v.18). Meditating upon these passages together with our reference passage for today (Heb 5:13-14) we realize that God desires not just teachers of the Word, but all His children to mature in the faith that they may discern and proclaim the truth, reject and warn others about falsehood and glorify God in so doing. This is something He expects of every Christian just as every loving parent would desire and expect their little ones to grow physically and become independent and productive adults.

Note, however, that this process does not come automatically for God the Holy Spirit will not do for us what we can reasonably do for ourselves, which is to consistently study and live out God’s Word. This is why we are told that those who, by reason of use, have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil are also those who are mature enough to handle the strong meat, rather than milk, of God’s Word (Heb 5:14).

Application –God’s Word is so amazing that it is simple enough even for young children to understand and accept the most fundamental truth-salvation through Jesus. Yet, it is deep enough that we may need all of eternity to discover all of its wonderful truths. Certainly, we need not be “meat” Christians to know the Gospel but we do need to be “meat” Christians to have a deeper understanding of His Word which will make us steadfast and discerning. Only then can we be of greater use to God, proclaiming His Word to those who are still outside His kingdom and to help other believers grow in the faith.

THOUGHT: The only way to become more of a “meat” Christian is to start feasting on the “meat” of God’s Word!

PRAYER: Loving heavenly Father, thank Thee for Thy Word which is not just milk and meat but also bread indeed for my hungry soul.

IS BIBLICAL SEPARATION REQUIRED ALSO?

A practitioner of martial arts knows that the entire posturing of one's body has to be correct in order to be an effective exponent of this discipline. For example, the stance is important as it gives the person balance and stability. The forward knee must always be bent to prevent the risk of dislocation from an unexpected strike by the enemy. Fisted hands are positioned strategically to shield the face and upper abdomen while allowing the option of executing a swift counterpunch. Every part of the practitioner's body is in harmony so that he can be agile and lethal.

Likewise, interpreting God's Word involves wielding a spiritual weapon. Practitioners of the Sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God must have their entire spiritual positioning correct. This is where biblical separation comes in, otherwise we would be spiritually off-balanced. For example, we would sound hollow if we tried explaining to an unbeliever who asks if the Gospel is true, while denying that the Bible is inerrant and perfectly preserved at the same time. He would undoubtedly think that we have interpreted God's Word wrongly (which is indeed the case here) as he cannot reasonably be sure that the Gospel is not one of the "few minor errors" in the Bible. Furthermore, if we do not separate ourselves from false teachings and false teachers, we will become influenced by them. 2 Timothy 2:21 instructs us to purge ourselves from these that we will become vessels unto honor, fit for the Master's use.

Application – Have we at sometime had conversations with other Christians who have wrong beliefs and yet we have not been courageous or loving enough to correct them? Even worse, have we even, for the sake of maintaining good relations, agreed with them or participated in prayer and worship with them just to be "diplomatic"? God's Word makes no allowance for this. Indeed, the Word (Jesus) Himself said that He will deny us on the last day if we deny Him for He gave us the truth and expects us to uphold it even if it means severing ties with others (Matthew 10:33-34).

THOUGHT: A double-minded man is unstable in all his ways as is an interpreter of God's Word who does not practice separation.

PRAYER: Strengthen me, O Lord, that I may proclaim Your truths fearlessly and without compromise to an unbelieving world.

DOES SCRIPTURE INTERPRET SCRIPTURE?

Because of its self-authenticating nature, we can rely on the Bible to prove itself to be true. Indeed, it is to be the supreme authority and guide in all matters of faith. Self-authentication simply means to proclaim itself to be true. If we have a document that needs to be authenticated, we would need to bring it to a higher authority to have it certified as genuine. Since there is no higher authority than the Word of God, it therefore reasonably follows that only it can prove itself to be true. We see the same principle at work in John 8:18 where Jesus bears witness of Himself because He is perfectly unbiased, absolutely truthful and is the supreme Authority.

This being the case, we can therefore understand that this unique quality of the Holy Scriptures means that we can refer to one part of it, perhaps a passage that is simpler to understand, and use it to interpret another more difficult passage. Indeed, the Old Testament is in the New Testament revealed, and the New Testament is in the Old Testament concealed. Passages from the Old Testament and New Testament are often used to verify and interpret each other. Since the Holy Spirit is not only the author of the Bible but also the one who illuminates sinful man, He interprets His own Word. Hence, Scripture interprets Scripture.

Application – We may make the mistake of thinking that we should only read the Bible and nothing else in order to interpret scripture with scripture, and pray that the Holy Spirit will somehow enable us to understand. Though the Bible is the supreme authority in all matters of faith, this is not so say that we should not use other resources as aids. Indeed, many times we would have difficulty understanding certain passages if not for Bible study aids. We need not shy away from such as these were given of God to help us, but ultimately we should still check everything against God's Word.

THOUGHT: Only a wise God with no beginning and no end can be the source of a self-authenticating and self-interpreting book.

PRAYER: Give me the faith, O Lord, to remain steadfast, always holding Your Word in highest regard.

FRIDAY, APRIL 13

*Matthew 1:22-23
Memorise Isaiah 7:14*

"...behold, a virgin shall conceive... and shall call his name Immanuel."

HOW DO WE INTERPRET ISAIAH 7:14?

From Isaiah 7:14 and Matthew 1:22-23 we see once again how the New Testament is concealed in the Old Testament and how the Old Testament is revealed in the New Testament. It is clear from the simple reading of the two verses that the prophecy of a virgin birth in Isaiah 7:14 was perfectly and entirely fulfilled by Jesus Christ in Matthew 1:22-23. As we understand both verses literally and with faith, we would realize some wonderful truths about the Bible.

Firstly, that the Bible has a perfect track record when it comes to foretelling future events. Isaiah 7:14 (written between 701 and 681 B.C.) foretold the virgin birth of Christ some 700 years before it actually happened.

Secondly, the Bible verifies its other verses to be true simply because there is no contradiction with itself anywhere within its pages. What is left for the interpreter to do is to use those better understood verses to interpret those that are less clear.

Thirdly, the Bible can be interpreted literally. Though many details were not given in Isaiah 7:14 regarding the birth of Christ, these details were later revealed to us in the New Testament in passages such as Matthew 1:18-25. We can be convinced from the New Testament account that Mary was indeed a virgin, conceived of the Holy Spirit and gave birth to Jesus even before she and Joseph had consummated their marriage because the New Testament plainly said so, proving Isaiah 7:14 to be absolutely correct and hence fulfilling it to the letter.

Application – “Wooden literalism” is another form of literal interpretation which is incorrect. This form of interpretation is rigid and mechanical, not taking into account things such as allegories, metaphors, parables and similes. Application of this form of interpretation would result in a bazaar and meaningless account of the superpowers of the world in sequential order in Daniel 7 and the end-time events described in Revelation 17. Biblical literalism, however, would give these prophetic accounts a more logical interpretation.

THOUGHT: It is the Holy Spirit Who will help me hear and not just listen, see and not just look.

PRAYER: Lord, I pray that Thou will give me the wisdom to know not just Thy written Word but also Thy living Word.

HOW IMPORTANT IS CONTEXT?

Matthew 18:20 is one of the most often misquoted verses from the Bible. This verse, read in isolation, seems to say that Jesus is always in the midst of Christians whenever they gather or pray together. However, looking at verses 15-19, we realize that this verse is actually referring to church discipline. Here, two or three people gathering in Christ's name means that church discipline and the affairs of the church cannot be undertaken by any person if it is not done under the authority of the local church under which the body of believers who belong to that particular church operates. Of course these all are subsumed under Jesus, the head of the Church. Christ will not approve or honour anything done outside of this authority.

Matthew 18:18 is also another verse which has been misquoted by many a church to justify their practice of “demon-binding” or “Satan-binding”. One can imagine scenes of sweaty pastors engaged in a ‘wrestling match’ against Satan and his minions in order to bind them. Unfortunately, it is the pastor and the congregation that ends up getting bound by this spiritual delusion instead while the devil remains free, delighted with their folly.

What Jesus really meant by this verse is simply that the actions of those to whom He has given authority to act on His behalf shall be confirmed to be in accordance to His will in heaven one day. Thus when two or three are gathered in the name of Christ to administer church discipline, if all things are done according to His will, in His name, Jesus Christ would be there in their midst to validate and affirm their actions.

Application – Here we see how quoting verses out of context can result in inappropriate application which may not only cause confusion but may even shipwreck the faith of sincere believers. After all, looking again at the example of Matthew 18:18 above, how can we believe God's Word is all-powerful if Satan and his demons keep breaking free to do mischief in this world in spite of getting repeatedly “bound” in Jesus' name? Reading the preceding and following verses helps us to see passages in the right context. Indeed, we can expand this and apply it to reading preceding and following chapters to put an entire chapter in the right context. Which other verses can you think of which are often wrongly or incompletely quoted?

THOUGHT: A text without a context becomes a pretext for a proof text.

PRAYER: Heavenly Father, may You give me the necessary discipline never to handle Your Word loosely.

CAN SCRIPTURE CONTRADICT SCRIPTURE?

There was once a craftsman during the Era of the Warring States in China who sold spears and shields. To promote the sale of his wares, he proclaimed that his shield could withstand the blow of any weapon, and that his spear could penetrate anything. A person in the crowd he was hawking to then asked him what would happen if he were to use his spear against his shield, to which he was dumbfounded. This is how the Chinese idiom of the spear and shield came to be used to describe self-contradiction.

A contradiction is an error. Since the Bible comes from God who is perfect, it cannot contradict itself since that would mean that it has errors. When there are two contradictory statements, at least one of the statements must be untrue and is therefore a lie. 1 John 2:21 says that no lie is of the truth, meaning that the truth cannot contradict itself and those who teach anything contrary to this are false teachers. Since all of God's Word is perfect and true, it therefore follows that it cannot have contradictions. Furthermore, even though the Bible was written by 40 or so human authors over 1500 years, they were all inspired by the same Holy Spirit who is God Himself. God cannot lie (Tit 1:2) any more than He can contradict Himself.

Application – Many who attack the Bible and say that it has contradictions have never bothered to read and study the Bible for themselves. A Bible-answers website put it this way: "a difference is not a contradiction. It is only an error if there is absolutely no conceivable way the verses or passages can be reconciled. Even if an answer is not available right now, that does not mean an answer does not exist. Many have found a supposed error in the Bible in relation to history or geography only to find out that the Bible is correct once further archaeological evidence is discovered." Let us not be hasty in concluding that the Bible has contradictions when we encounter difficult passages. Know that God is unlike the contradictory spear and shield craftsman that the rest of us are from time to time. Rather, He is the infinitely wise and infallible Ancient of Days whose Word can be completely trusted for it is perfect as He is perfect. If we seem to see contradictions in the Bible, they are only apparently differences, and it is our fallible understanding that is lacking, not God's infallible words.

THOUGHT: The Bible would contradict itself only if it had errors, but we know that this is not so for we have a perfect Bible.

PRAYER: Heavenly Father, sanctify us through Thy truth, for Thy Word is truth.

MONDAY, APRIL 16

2 John 1:9
Memorise 2 John 1:9

"But speak thou the things which become sound doctrine."

HOW IMPORTANT IS RIGHT DOCTRINE?

Right doctrine is sound doctrine. It is impossible to overemphasize the importance of sound doctrine in the life of a Christian. Right thinking about all spiritual matters is vital if we would have right living. Just as we cannot sow a silk purse out of a sow's ears, how can we have a Christ-like character if all we have are unsound and erroneous teachings?

The word doctrine simply means Bible teachings taught and held. It is the sacred task of all Christians to be certain that these teachings correspond exactly to Bible truth. What we understand and believe must constitute sound doctrine for there are false doctrine and doctrines of the devil. To hold on to the doctrine of Christ is to hold on the true real knowledge of God. To do so otherwise would be sin and transgression, for in 2 John 1:9 we are warned that without the right doctrine, we cannot come to God, but if we do have right and sound doctrine, then we would know both God the Father and the Son.

Each generation of Christians must guard the truths of the Bible. While truth itself is eternal and unchanging, the minds of men are easily swayed and influenced by godless teachings. As the apostles not only taught truth but contended for its purity against any who would corrupt it, each succeeding generation of faithful men must diligently study to rightly divide God's Word and most of all be courageous and vigilant to guard the precious truths of God.

Application – Dear teens, the first step you must take is to be serious about your knowledge of the Bible. Seek to increase in your depth and understanding of the Bible. Here are some ways: -

- a) After paying close attention to what is taught in your Teens class, follow-up by reading on your own to find out more about the subject.
- b) Attend a Bible Study group or initiate one with the help of your parents, teachers and friends.
- c) Read as many good Christian books as possible perhaps setting a target of one per month.

THOUGHT: Right creeds lead to right deeds.

PRAYER: Lord, give me grace and strength to pursue the knowledge of God and to grow spiritually day by day as I feed upon your holy and eternal Word.

TUESDAY, APRIL 17

James 1:21
Memorise James 1:21

“To do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God”

HOW IMPORTANT IS HUMILITY?

Humility is so important that the famous theologian John Calvin, as related to many of the older generation by Rev. Timothy Tow the founder of the B.P. Movement, that the first, second and third requirements one must have in studying theology, is “Humility, humility and humility.” None of us can say that we are humble enough, and so we must constantly seek the Lord for humility and more humility.

In the study of God’s Word, humility is most needed. First we need humility to examine ourselves and honestly confess our many sins and evil conduct before the Lord. Sins are filthy, loathsome and detestable in God’s sight and we should have abhorrence to it. Once we have such an attitude and seek to cleanse ourselves of a mind full of sensuality and wickedness, we are able to receive truth with greater force. As James 1:21 clearly tells us, we must first lay apart all filthiness and sin first, before we can begin to receive God’s Word. Purity of heart and mind is the best preparation always for seeing and receiving truth.

A humble spirit thus receives the Word of God with meekness. The beauty and fair influence of truth radiates more brightly in them. Meekness, gentleness, docility, are everywhere required in receiving the instructions of religion, as they are when we want to obtain knowledge of any kind, but especially the sacred things of God. Further, the Word of God will be firmly engrafted or implanted in that person, leading to fruits of righteousness, to the glory of God.

Application – Dear teens, are you proud of your human intellect and wisdom so that you question what God says in His Word? It is time to say to yourself that if God says it, I will believe it. Don’t doubt anymore. For example if you meditate on the sinfulness of our human nature, you will find that what God says is true. Our righteousness is as filthy rags and there is none righteous, not one (Romans 3: 10). The more you prayerfully meditate on what God says in His Word, you will soon find that you cannot deny the supreme truth it holds.

THOUGHT: Humility is true greatness.

PRAYER: Lord, teach me that pride goes before a fall and before honour is humility.

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 18

2 Timothy 1:7
Memorise 2 Timothy 1:7

“wherefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober..”

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF HUMAN REASONING?

Whatever God teaches in His Word does not bypass our mind. Instead, we bring our mind to bear on the truths taught in God’s Word and we find that it harmonizes with human reasoning.

God has given us a sound mind to use as we apply ourselves intellectually on what we read and understand around us. In Paul’s exhortation to Timothy, his spiritual son, he desires that he cultivates such a well-balanced and sober mind. Paul regarded it as necessary to the performance of the duties of his office as the pastor and minister of God’s Word. It is just as needful for us as believers, now, as it was then.

God does not want us to be ruled by our emotions and feelings but to be grounded in the objective truth of God’s Word. We are to have a clear understand and sound judgment so as to be soberly influenced to think, speak and act aright in all things. Together with the power and love that God has given us, we are thus enabled to hear, believe, hope and endure all things. John Calvin, the great theologian, states that the human reasoning faculty given to man, while not the master of faith, is an indispensable servant having an essential role to play in the task of faith seeking knowledge.

Application – Dear teen, we thank God for the reasoning faculty that He has given us. This make us people of sober minds, not given to emotionalism but able to see things in its proper place and perspective. But it is Scripture that guides us in seeking God and it is Scripture that is the guide and authority to the reason which does not fully and rightly function without faith. First we must have faith. Then faith seeks understanding of the Scriptures - why and what we believe.

THOUGHT: It is rational to believe in the incomprehensibility and omnipo-
tence of God.

PRAYER: Our Father in heaven, thank you for creating reason, not that I may use it to produce truth independently, but that I may use it to understand the revealed truth of God.

THURSDAY, APRIL 19

2 Timothy 3:16
Memorise 2 Timothy 3:16

“The word of God is quick, and powerful, sharper than any twoedged sword”

HOW MUST WE VIEW GOD’S WORD?

This verse clearly speaks of the inspiration of all Scripture – both the Old Testament and the New Testament. The phrase “given by inspiration of God” literally has the meaning of God breathing into the writers of Scripture, divinely inspiring them to write the exact words He wants them to write. The idea is that Scripture is the production of God. In this way, the sacred writers were kept from error. Thus we say that the Bible is inerrant and infallible – without error and incapable of any error. It is also perfect as God is perfect. It is everlasting as God is everlasting. It is fully preserved for “Heaven and earth shall pass away but my words shall not pass away” (Mat 24: 35).

The Bible is also profitable for doctrine as well as for reproof and correction. There is sound doctrine therein. In the process, it improves us of our sins and corrects us when we are wrong. The Word of God is the most powerful and the most effective means of rescuing those who are ungodly and in the depths of sin. No reformation can be permanent which is not based on the principles of the Word of God.

There is instruction in righteousness throughout the Bible. Man needs to be taught what is right, what is required of him, in order that he may lead a holy life. God’s Word will furnish him with the rules of holy living and thus guide him successfully to heaven. Therefore we should always regard the Scripture as our supreme authority in our life

Application - Dear Teen, there is no book like the Bible. It is a divine book from heaven and God Himself to teach us the heavenly way. First and foremost, it leads us to eternal life for it tells us that unless we believe and confess our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, repenting of our sins, we will perish (John 3: 14-18). Being thus born again to walk in the Spirit, we are nourished by this very Word to grow in grace and knowledge of God. Thus we must have the utmost reverence and respect for the Word of God. We must approach it with holy awe, never doubting it nor scorning it, but fully believing that these are the very inspired words of God speaking to us.

THOUGHT: Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law.

PRAYER: Lord, may I treasure your Word, reading, loving, obeying and living it.

FRIDAY, APRIL 20

Genesis 3:1
Memorise Genesis 3:1

"There shall come in the last days socffers, walking after their own lusts"

WHAT ABOUT THOSE THAT DOUBT GOD'S WORD?

The first ever instance of men doubting God was in the beautiful Garden of Eden. Even there the Tempter was found. The Tempter was the Devil, in the shape and likeness of a serpent. Satan's plan was to draw our first parents to sin, and so to separate them from the perfect communion with God. Thus the devil was from the beginning a great mischief-maker.

He tempted Eve when he talked to her when she was alone. When he said, "Yea, hath God said?", he questioned God's clear command that she should not eat of the fruit, and placed the seed of doubt in Eve's mind. His question insinuated that God is not that good and kind. Surely there is some mistake. Satan tried to create a doubt in her mind and appeared as an angel of light (2 Cor 11: 14), offering to lead her to the "true" interpretation.

Satan tempted Eve, that by her he might tempt Adam. It is his strategy to send temptations through people we do not suspect, and by those that have the most influence over us. Beware of his wiles. It is our wisdom to keep up a firm belief of God's command, and a high respect for it. What God says, we will abide by it. Satan teaches men first to doubt, and then to deny. Our strength and our wisdom are always to think well of God as the best good, trusting and obeying Him at all times.

Application - Dear Teen, it is hard to be humble when you see the world taking advantage of the weak and the meek. But you need to take God at His Word. He says that before honour is humility and thus asking for His protection, wisdom and mercy, we react with meekness to the rough and tough talk around us. We obey God by reacting humbly to the taunts and mockings of men, even friends, with faith that God will honour us for obedience to His Word. Do not doubt. Do not deny. A Christian who walks arrogantly is no witness for the Lord.

THOUGHT: "Humble yourselves therefore, under the mighty hand of God that he may exalt you in due time" (1 Peter 5:6).

PRAYER: Gracious loving heaving Father, ever teach me to be humble for thou lovest the meek and humble.

SATURDAY, APRIL 21

Revelation 22:18-19
Memorise Revelation 22:18-19

"Ye shall not add unto the word...neither shall ye diminish ought from it"

THOSE WHO TRY TO 'CORRECT' GOD'S WORD

To "correct" God's Word is to corrupt God's Word. It is perfect and there is absolutely no need to add or subtract or change God's Word. Thus the Apostle Paul puts this solemn injunction here that no one is to do that. The object is to guard Scripture from being corrupted by sinful men.

Those who add to God's Word think that they can furnish a more complete and full explanation. The modern corrupters are those who think they have new truth from God that they want to communicate to the people. Others claim to receive visions and dreams from God, and see them as additional revelation from God, even using them to supersede the Word of God in their lives. Such persons are actually the enemy of Christ and the curse of God is upon them.

Then there are those who subtract from God's Word, even taking out twelve verses of Mark 16, as was done by the NIV translators when they removed Mark 16:9-20 as well as many other verses from different parts of the Bible. These evil men are rejecting the Word of God when they discard and cast doubts on any part of God's Word. Every jot and title is precious. They have tampered with God's pure and perfect Word and God says that He will remove their part out of the book of life. Their names were never written in the first place. They were never saved and they will now not be saved.

Application – Dearest teen, there will be times when the Word of God is difficult to understand. There will also be some passages that are obscure so that you indulge in your own conjectures. Whatever it is, it is wisdom to leave these things to time and event. Little by little as you grow in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord, more and more things will be clearer to you. Above all, understand that a finite mind like ours can never fathom the infinite mind of God and it is best always to trust and obey. No jot or tittle of Christ's Word shall fall to the ground. All shall have its fulfillment in God's time.

THOUGHT: "...the truth of the Lord endureth for ever. Praise ye the Lord." (Psalm 117: 2).

PRAYER: Gracious and loving heavenly Father, may I ever magnify thy Word by loving your Word, studying and obeying it all the days of my life.

WHY MIGHT OTHERS IGNORE DOCTRINE

There is yet another group of people who err when they ignore doctrine. The time is indeed come that there is a large group of people who seek a kind of instruction more conformable to their wishes and feelings, such as the lust for the health and wealth gospel so popular nowadays. They ignore sound doctrine that will contribute to the health of their soul and salvation and seek after the material comforts and sensual pleasures of this world. It is carnal, after the flesh and not after the spirit (Rom 8:4-9). Others ignore doctrine because they want to elevate unity. However, it must be unity in truth, truth being of supreme importance.

There will always be false teachers who seek to lead people astray. We need to be wise concerning the evils of the world. As sins abound, so will the wickedness of men. However, instead of having wisdom, these foolish people have "itching ears" and are ready to run after all kinds of charismatic and popular teachers/preachers of the day. Our desire to hear the truth must not lead us to be fickle and unsettled, constantly running after many teachers. Far more can be achieved if we learn under the patient and intelligent labour of a single faithful teacher of God's Word.

People turn our ears from the solid truth of God's Word because the truth points to their sins, demands conformity to a crucified Christ and they are unable to accept it. Instead of repenting, they reject the truth. They turn to believing fables which are old wives tales, figments of their imagination and utterly vain.

Application – Dear teen, be not like these fickle and frivolous people. Hold fast to that which is good. Be watchful and vigilant. The enemies we face are "all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life" (1 Joh 2:16). Also, keep close to fellow believers to defend yourselves against the attacks of Satan. Encourage one another as well as pray for one another.

THOUGHT: "Continue thou in the things which thou have learned"
(2 Tim 3:14a).

PRAYER: Lord, grant that I will keep the faith that was once delivered unto the saints.

MONDAY, APRIL 23

Ephesians 4:14
Memorise Ephesians 4:14

“For there are certain men crept in unawares...”

DO SOME PEOPLE DELIBERATELY MISINTERPRET?

God does not want us to be so childish and naïve as to think that everybody is kind and good. We must realize that there are evil people who seek to entrap and deceive their ‘victims.’ They are full of ‘cunning craftiness.’ Within the school, you are aware that there are thieves, cheats and even gangsters. Outside the school, there are kidnappers, swindlers and loan sharks. In the realm of the spiritual, there are also men who have all sorts of unbelief, practice the occult and even witchcraft. Even within the Church, the Bible gives numerous warnings of wolves in sheep’s clothing who would come in to spoil the flock. They would appear like Christians, act like Christians, even becoming leaders, teachers and pastors in churches. Their purpose is not to serve or glorify God, but to serve themselves. As such they would deliberately use the Word of God to their own advantage, with false teachings and doctrines to the end that they may deceive.

To this the Apostle Paul exhorts us to be mature Christians to hold firmly the sound doctrine that we have learned. Even if you are a young Christian, settle it in your mind to acquire a deep knowledge of God’s Word and be well grounded in the doctrines of our faith. This is our best protection against the people who deliberately teach contrary to the Bible.

If we are not steadfast in our belief, we are like a ship sailing on the restless ocean, tossed about with every changing wind. We can also be easily influenced by the cunning skill and ‘trickery’ of people. Therefore, be on your guard. Our values and beliefs are formed by the Word of God and not by the trickery of false teachers.

Application - Dear teen, ungodly men have been misinterpreting the Bible since the days of the early church. The Apostle Paul gives an example in his warning about two corrupt teachers called Hymeneus and Philetus who twisted the meaning of the Bible concerning resurrection (2 Timothy 2:17-18). The Bible teaches a bodily resurrection of believers at the last day but they teach a moral and spiritual resurrection only, interpreting the Bible allegorily. Thus they destroy the truth of God that gives hope to believers. They have also destroyed the faith of some. May we never become one of their victims.

THOUGHT: “Study to show thyself approved unto God” (2 Tim 2: 15).

PRAYER: Lord, may I know my Bible well enough to discern truth from error.

TUESDAY, APRIL 24

2 Peter 3:16
Memorise 2 Peter 3:16

“The Spirit of truth...will guide you into all truth”

DON'T WE NEED SCHOLARS FOR DIFFICULT PASSAGES?

In this verse, Peter honestly writes that in the epistles of Paul, there are some things that are hard or difficult to understand. Paul writes of the grand truths of Scripture; the great doctrine of the cross; of the depravity of men; of the new birth, of the return of the Saviour to judge the world; the duty of a serious, devout and prayerful life; and of being prepared for the heavenly world.

These things are difficult to understand because of several reasons. The mind is overpowered by the grandeur of the thought and the incomprehensible nature of the theme. Often it could be that men are unlearned and unstable and therefore unable to see the truths of God. It could also be that the truth hurts or the mind is so prejudiced against it that we are unwilling to receive it. The real difficulty could also be that the heart is deceitful and desperately wicked so that there is no willingness to receive the truth.

Biblical scholars are certainly needed to teach, preach and expound God's Word to God's people. They are God's gift to His Church. They can make difficult things plain and easy to understand. But the humble inquirer after truth may find enough in the Bible to guide his feet in the paths of salvation. We as believers all have the Holy Spirit in us that can illumine our hearts and guide us into all truth. We are told in 2 Timothy 3: 15 that the sacred Scriptures can indeed make us wise unto salvation, if only we have an open and teachable heart. A believer will also certainly find much milk and meat to help him grow in his faith.

Application - Dear teen, read your Bible daily and diligently. Pray before you read God's Word, asking the Holy Spirit to illumine your mind and heart. As the hymn Break Thou the Bread of Life goes, ask God to make His Word plain and clear to you. We need more than human wisdom and understanding to be blessed by God's Word. We need a humble heart and a submissive spirit so that the entrance of God's Word can cleanse and bless us. Spiritual things need to be spiritually discerned.

THOUGHT: We have the spirit of God that we might know the things that are given to us.

PRAYER: Our Father in heaven, as I grow in the knowledge of God's Word, teach me to be grateful to the many teachers who have taught me too.

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 25

2 Timothy 3:7
Memorise 2 Timothy 3:7

“But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise”

AREN'T SCHOLARS THE BEST INTERPRETERS?

First, we must understand that there are Bible-believing scholars and liberal scholars. Bible-believing scholars hold to the supreme authority of the Bible for all matters of faith and practice. Liberal scholars have a low view of God's Word, looking for mistakes in it and critiquing it. They belong to the category of people who are 'ever learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth.' They might have a form of godliness but they are actually not saved for they have not saving faith in God.

Therefore do not look to these scholars to teach you. They may have spent years in seminaries, learnt and even taught the Biblical languages, but they do not have the truth. They are blind and ignorant guides who are only enemies of God. They begin with a premise of unbelief, and seek only their own profit and glory. Instead of learning more about God and exalting His name, they are intent on finding fault with the Bible, and ridiculing it. Only the scholars who are born again and have complete faith in the Bible are capable of interpreting the Word of God faithfully.

But a truly born-again believer can also study the Bible with great profit. The central message of salvation and the wondrous works of God are so plainly stated that any child of God can understand it. "The entrance of thy words giveth light: it giveth understanding to the simple" (Psalm 119: 130). The technicalities of scholarship may be out of his reach, but nonetheless he can, with God's blessings, grasp all the main truths of God's message.

Application – Dear teen, you can equip yourself to know the Bible better. Besides reading and studying the Bible in your class and at home, you can also buy books on Bible customs to read on the background of many parables and events in the Bible. There are also maps that you should refer to and even study especially when you are studying the many battles of Joshua. There is also the E-sword software that you should have in your computer to check on Bible commentaries, verses and do cross-references. Also, there are sermons online (Check up on the safe sites) that you can hear to great benefit. Money spent on these is money well spent.

THOUGHT: Invest in things of eternal value.

PRAYER: Father in heaven, may I spare no effort to devote myself to a lifetime of Bible study for your Word is the delight of my heart.

WHAT IS THE RATIONALISTIC METHOD?

This approach, which stresses human reasoning, blossomed during the post Reformation period. It continues to this day in many liberal seminaries and apostate churches. Germany is the home of many proponents of this method of interpretation. This is due to the many schools of Higher Criticism there which seek to undermine the authority of Scripture.

Those who use this method of interpretation literally cut up the Bible into many tiny pieces and dissect and examine, categorizing many portions as what they claim to be “not God’s Word” and then reassemble them back into what is now a very errant and fallible Bible. This they do because they pick and choose those parts of the Bible which they believe is God’s Word, using their own reasoning.

The basic presupposition of this method is that the Bible is like any other man-made book. There is no such thing as inspiration. All Scripture is subjected to human reason in order to determine the validity or historicity of its statements. Whatever portions that do not square with their human thinking and understanding is rejected. Thus miracles are explained away as false. They cannot accept that Jesus can walk on the water and so they reject it or sometimes explain it as there being rocks beneath the water which made Jesus ‘appear’ to walk on the water. The supernatural and miraculous are things that do not make sense to them. The knowledge of the sinful finite interpreter takes center stage.

Application – So you see, dear teen, how important it is to rightly divide God’s Word. This harmful method of interpretation exalts the sinful interpreter who sets himself up as the standard of truth and only sees value in Scripture as it fits and confirms his own opinions. This method denies the greatness of God, His omnipotence, His omnipresence and His omniscience. This method is to be totally rejected.

THOUGHT: Is your Christian faith based on reason?

PRAYER: Our Father in heaven, grant that to know that there are more wondrous things in heaven and earth than what my eye and ear can see and hear.

FRIDAY, APRIL 27

Luke 10:30-36
Memorise Luke 10:34

"When the plain sense makes good sense, seek no other sense"

WHAT IS THE ALLEGORICAL METHOD?

This method originates through the union of Greek philosophy and religion. To various degrees, this method attempts to see a deeper meaning behind the simple literal reading of each passage by way of allegories. It is not the natural evident meaning that gives the Bible its importance but the 'mystical' sense, which means its hidden or spiritual sense. These interpreters search for the hidden meaning beyond the external, literal meaning. They may sometimes have good intentions, but the method is wrong, and it results in the wrong interpretations of God's Word.

Thus in the account of the Good Samaritan, the literal plain meaning is that we are to love our neighbour, showing kindness and compassion. This neighbour includes anybody that God brings our way, including someone we dislike or are at enmity with. However, those who use the allegorical method might explain this passage by saying that the wounded man stands for Adam, the thieves are the devil and his demons, and the innkeeper is the ruler of the church as the inn is the church. Jesus is then the good Samaritan who brings Adam into the church, and gives two coins, the Old and New Testament. This is sheer imagination.

The error of this school of interpretation is its foundational assumption that what God said in plain language is not really what God meant. Instead, it depends on the ingenuity and imagination of the interpreter and not the Word of God. This method makes the Bible say what the interpreter wants it to say. This forces the biblical text to have a meaning which is does not possess. The authority of the Bible is therefore also lost.

Application - Dear teen, an example of a man who used this method is Harold Camping who predicted that the world would end on December 21st, 2011 but of course that proved to be false. His followers were deceived and Christianity had a bad name because of his unbiblical date setting. Read all about it in this website http://www.lambion.com/articles/articles_cults16.php. When the plain sense makes good sense, seek no other sense. This is a good guideline for you when you read and study your Bible.

THOUGHT: Holy Scripture does not allow for any private interpretation.

PRAYER: O Father, illumine me and guide me when I read, study and meditate on your sacred Scriptures. Help me to rightly divide your Word.

SATURDAY, APRIL 28

Exodus 20:13
Memorise Exodus 20:13

“Prophecy of the scripture is not of any private interpretation”

WHAT IS THE MYSTICAL METHOD?

This method is very closely associated with the allegorical method. It involves both allegorical and mystical interpretations of the Old Testament. Thus it goes beyond the allegorical method and opens the door even wider to a great variety of interpretations. Using this method, a passage of Scripture with an obvious literal meaning is interpreted to have a number of exalted meanings. Because of the desire to reach beyond the letter into the spirit of the Word, this method is also called Spiritualization.

As an example, “Thou shalt not kill” the natural sense is that we are forbidden to murder, have hatred and to take revenge. The spiritual or mystical sense is to interpret it as forbidding one to act the devil and trying to destroy a man’s soul. Although that is true, that we should not do so, this teaching is not found in this particular verse, and other verses should be sought to find that command.

The error of this method, by saying that there are any number of meanings to a Scripture text it implies that when God wrote Scripture, He meant more than what He actually said in His word. The problem is that if God does not mean what He says then how do we know what is the truth. Mystics can say what they like with the Scripture text and no one will be able to speak with any authority as they discuss and debate every verse. Again, the authority of the Bible is undermined if we adopt this harmful method.

Application – Dear teen, the method we choose to interpret the Bible changes the conclusions we reach. One method will lead us to conclude that baptism is not essential to salvation. A different method will lead us to conclude that baptism is essential to salvation. Thus choosing the correct method to interpret the Bible can mean the difference between salvation and damnation. The solution is to choose the correct method of interpretation. Do you know what it is?

THOUGHT: Always handle the Word of God reverently, humbly and prayerfully.

PRAYER: O Father in heaven, help me to be diligent and humble as I read and study my Bible, that I might rightly divide the Word of God.

WHAT IS THE HISTORICAL LITERAL METHOD?

This is the oldest method in existence. It is said to have originated with Ezra, the Father of Hermeneutics. The progress of its history is through the Palestinian Jews, Christ and the Apostles, the School of Antioch, and the Reformers, to the fundamental Conservatives of today.

This approach regards the Bible to have been written as history, that is, neither allegorical, nor composed of fables and traditions. However, this does not mean that everything is to be interpreted literally, without recognizing the fact that the Bible also had figures of speech, metaphors and idioms. It accepts every kind of figurative language as well as the spiritual meaning in a literal context. It also does not rule out the possibility of having multiple applications of a particular verse or passage. Whilst there can be only one right meaning and interpretation of any verse, we can draw multiple applicaitons to our Christian life from it.

In today's reading we see that the prophets of old as well as the angels from heaven could not fully understand the great salvation that Jesus Christ would effect when He suffered and died on the cross. They could not discern the difference between the prophecies of a suffering savior and a victorious king. Yet the prophets faithfully reported and wrote what God would have them to write and now their writings as recorded in the Bible benefit us. Only with hindsight are we able to understand that Christ came the first time to save us and then He will come again the second time to judge those outside His kingdom. Between these two comings, is a period of more than 2,000 years now. Whilst it was hard for them to understand, it is clear to us when we interpret the prophecies literally, and not attempt to find any deeper allegorical or mystical meaning behind each verse.

Application – Dear teen, the golden rule of Bible interpretation is always to seek the plain sense and then to seek no other sense. This is a good and safe rule to avoid error and wild speculations. We need to seek what God says and accurately understand it. Thank God for godly and faithful preachers/teachers of the Word who will exegete and expound Bible texts and passages to aid us in our understanding too.

THOUGHT: There is one interpretation but many applications.

PRAYER: Help me, Lord, to be a good student of thy infallible, inerrant and fully preserved Word.

MONDAY, APRIL 30

2 Peter 1:21

Memorise 2 Peter 1:21

“Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth”

WHAT IS THE CORRECT METHOD?

The actual author of the 66 books of the Bible is the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is omniscient. He knows what was written down since the days of Genesis and till the days of the events recorded in Revelation. This being the case, we should find out what the divine author, God has in mind when He moved the holy men of old to write. The human interpreter should step aside in reverence and awe and let God be God. We are to try to find out only what God’s intended meaning is, and seek no other fanciful explanation.

The holy men of God were moved by the Holy Spirit of God when they wrote the books of the Bible. Though their distinct style and personality can be discerned from a study of their books, nevertheless, they wrote under the inspiration and guidance of the Holy Ghost such that sometimes they did not have full comprehension of what God wanted them to write. Yet in obedience to God’s command, they wrote.

These holy men of God, moved strongly by a secret and powerful divine impulse to write what they did, wrote in the name and fear of God. This shows the authority of the Scriptures, that they are the very words of God, and not of men. As such they should be attended to, and received with all affection and reverence; and that the Spirit is the best interpreter of them, who first dictated them. They are to be the rule of our faith and practice. The Bible alone stands far above any other literary works of men, and must be viewed as such. Nothing man has ever written or ever will write can match up to the perfection, glory and splendour of God’s Word.

Application – Dear young teenager, practice the literal method of interpreting Scripture. Let God interpret what He has said. The words God inspired were given to communicate a certain meaning to those who read it. The means that if we find what is the correct meaning of the word, its context, normal and customary usage at the time it was used, we can know the correct interpretation. The interpretation is the meaning God wanted His words to convey.

THOUGHT: Confusion arises because unskilled men, even unregenerate men, mishandle God’s Word.

PRAYER: Father in heaven, may I apply proper biblical principles of interpretation and accurately understand thy Word.

TUESDAY, MAY 1

Hebrews 1:1
Memorise Hebrews 1:1

“God, ...in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets”

DO BIBLICAL GENRES AFFECT INTERPRETATION?

As we read through the Bible, we realize that it does not read like any story book that we get from the bookshops. Neither is it like the textbooks that we use in school. It is unique (possibly confusing even), in that it is a collection of different sorts of writings, not always arranged in chronological or logical order. We have of course the narratives that are easier to understand, but there are also chapters and books of laws, of genealogies; there are also many books of poetry and prophecy, many of which are not so easy to understand. Then there are epistles (letters) recorded, and mysterious visions of the future. The list goes on!

You may ask – if God wants to teach us the Christian doctrine so that we know His will, isn't it easier to give us a book of systematic theology, rather than this collection of books, which include various “genres” like narrative, poetry, epistles etc?

But – think again – won't it be very boring if all that we have is just systematic theology (like a textbook)? Don't get me wrong, I love systematic theology, and find it very exciting – but it's even more exciting to read the Bible itself – Genesis, the books of Kings, the Prophets, the Gospels, Epistles etc! These would be so enriching and wonderful if you read the Bible with understanding, with love and with the guidance of the Holy Spirit!

In going through each book of the Bible, we learn to appreciate the faith of Abraham (*“he went out, not knowing whither he went”*), the “rise and fall” of David, the labours of the apostle Paul, and most important, the life of our Lord Jesus – not only intellectually, but with the knowledge that goes deep into the heart!

God made us and He knows us the best! He knows that we learn best through different types of genres (narrative, poetry etc)! And so we come to the verse for today: *“God... at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets”*.

The question today is: “Do biblical genres affect interpretation”? The answer is of course, “yes”! we will learn over the next few weeks the what and how and why of this statement.

THOUGHT: The Bible is “a pool in which a baby can paddle or an elephant can swim”.

PRAYER: Lord, teach me to love thy Word more and more each day.

WHAT ARE NARRATIVES?

If you have attended Sunday School as a child, you would have learned the story of Esther! A narrative describes how a story is told. But do remember that when we say that the Book of Esther is a story, it does not mean that it is fiction. It is certainly not a tale which somebody invented, but every last detail of the account is as accurate and true as God’s Word is true!

What then is a narrative? A famous author defines “narrative” as “a way of ordering events and thoughts in a coherent sequence that makes them interesting to listen to.”

If you take time to read through the story of Esther, I’m sure you’ll agree with this definition! When I was reading it, I could imagine the story being made into a film (which could be very exciting to watch!). I could imagine the scenes vividly in my mind – the lavish banquet, the selection of Esther as queen, the evil plot by Haman, the counter-plot by Esther and Mordecai, Haman hanging from the gallows, and finally the celebration of the Jews in the festival of Purim!

The textbooks would tell you that there are 6 elements to a narrative:

1. Setting, 2. Character, 3. Plot, 4. Conflict, 5. Climax, 6. Resolution

If you know the story of Esther, you can see that the narrative has all the elements aplenty – a vivid setting, unforgettable characters, an exciting plot, breath-holding conflicts, a superb climax, and a wonderful resolution!

But, most important of all, God gives us the book of Esther not so much to keep us entertained, but to teach us valuable lessons – the sovereignty of God – how He kept His “chosen people” safe from genocide – and this fits in with the whole theme of the Bible from creation to the election of Abraham, Jacob, Moses, David and finally to the “Son of David” – our Lord Jesus Christ! – the theme being how God preserved His people so that Jesus Christ can come as the “son of David” to be our Saviour!

Application – Each book or passage of a Bible has its own characteristics, and we should read it intelligently.

THOUGHT: Learn to enjoy, appreciate and learn from each part of the Bible (not only your “favourite” portions!)

PRAYER: Lord, forgive me for the many times I take your Word lightly.

WHAT IS POETRY?

Some things are easier to know than to define – and this includes poetry! Read all the 6 verses of Psalm One, and you can feel in your bones that “this is superb poetry”!

So, what is poetry? We can see it as a way of conveying a message concisely and beautifully and in a way that is easy to remember. Poetry that we find in the Bible is mostly in the Old Testament and were originally written in Hebrew. They can be found primarily in the books of poetry - Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Songs of Solomon. But not just in these books, Hebrew poetry abounds within the narratives and prophecies as well. In fact, one estimate has accounted approximately one third of the Old Testament to have been written in poetry.

The beauty of poetry lies in its brevity. Each succinct line is packed full of meaning. But at the same time, there are parts that are more difficult to understand and would require time and effort to interpret.

One distinctive that we must take note of when we study Hebrew poetry, is the common use of parallelism. In the lines of poetry, it is structured in a way that one line often parallels the next. There are 4 main types of parallelism that we can identify. They can either be synonymous, like in Psalm 1:1, the three traits of a blessed man are all paralleled to each other, with similar meanings. At times, the parallels can be opposites, where the next line contrasts or is contrary to the previous, often highlighted with the conjunction ‘but’. This can be seen in the ideas contrasted between verses 1 and 2 of Psalm 1. Yet other parallels are when the subsequent line further elaborates the previous one, like how the thought of delight in the law in verse 2 is further explained by the fact that the blessed man meditates in it day and night. The final type of parallelism is one where it is comparative, whereby an illustration is used to explain a point. This is like how a picture of a tree is used to describe the blessed man.

Application – Read, understand, memorise and do – and love! Can you identify any other parallels within Psalm 1?

THOUGHT: God gives us poetry. Have you learned to appreciate the beauty and depth of poetry?

PRAYER: I thank you, Lord, for giving us all things good and beautiful!

WHAT IS PROPHECY?

"The English word ("prophet") is taken directly from an ancient Greek verb which literally meant "to speak for" or "on behalf of." Thus the noun embraced the concept of speaking for someone, or a spokesman. The story of Moses at the burning bush is a good Biblical illustration – in Exodus 7: 1, God spoke to a very reluctant Moses, saying, 'See, I make you as God to Pharaoh; and Aaron your brother shall be your prophet.' Aaron was to be Moses' spokesman i.e. to speak for Moses.

In practice, the word "prophecy" can be used in two ways:

1. Prophecy means "foretelling" e.g. the many prophecies predicting our Lord's first and second comings. A good example would be today's verses, which in one short passage foretells both comings - as a humble child, and as a glorious Judge and King.
2. Prophecy can also mean "forth-telling" – eg the vast majority of the messages of the major and minor prophets come from direct commands of God through the mouths of the prophets. An excellent example is the opening of the Book of Isaiah: "Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth: for the LORD hath spoken, I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against me" (Is 1:2). You can easily imagine the prophet Isaiah standing in the market place warning the people of Jerusalem about God's wrath against their unfaithfulness.

Now – question time! Who is the greatest prophet of all? – Moses? Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel...?

Undoubtedly the right answer is: our Lord Jesus Christ – He not only speaks for God and reveals the truth about God's love and judgment, but He reveals the nature of God as nobody else can – because He is God Himself!

Application – Our Lord Jesus came to Earth to do His Father's will as "Prophet, Priest and King" – The greatest prophet, the greatest priest and the greatest king. So what should we do? – Listen to the prophet, Bless the priest (be thankful to Him), and worship the King!

THOUGHT: Do we still have prophets in the church today?

PRAYER: Lord, teach me to be thy "prophet" – to know thy Word so well that I will be able to "forth-tell" thy Word to others!

WHAT IS AN EPISTLE?

Nowadays, we can communicate with our friends easily – phone calls, emails, sms and even Skyping! But in New Testament days, it was much tougher! Writing and sending letters were much more laborious and expensive! So you can understand how important the epistles were, when so much time and expense was spent for them – for the sake of the believers. They only had the Old Testament for their scriptures at that time (no Acts, Revelation, and of course no epistles except those that they received!). They desperately needed authoritative biblical teaching! So the Apostles wrote the epistles to them to address certain issues in the churches, to correct false teachings, rebuke sin, and encourage the believers. Indeed in studying them, we can learn so much about God’s will.

But there’s one problem – When we read these epistles, it’s just like overhearing a phone conversation – we can hear only one side of the conversation, but we don’t quite know the context of the conversation. So, if we want to understand the epistles, we have to learn the background, and that means some hard work!

Recently, our church had just completed a series on 2 Corinthians. I must confess that before I did my homework, I had great difficulty in understanding this epistle, and even great reluctance in reading it. But after studying the book itself, with much assistance from the sermons and bible commentaries, I started to appreciate the great apostle Paul, especially his great love for the Christians in Corinth – even though they had caused him much grief, he continued to love them and tried his best to teach them. Another good and perhaps simpler epistle to read could be Paul’s epistle to the Philippians. It’s also called “the epistle of joy”. There are wonderful lessons and memory verses in this small epistle. Or what about James? To me, he’s like an experienced battle-scarred pastor with many stories to tell – and a “straight-talker” to boot. See how he began his epistle: “My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations” – Makes you want to see what more he has to say – right?

Application – Understanding the epistles quite often require much hard work – so do your homework! And listen attentively to the sermons!

THOUGHT: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind”

PRAYER: The word of God is indeed a “pearl of great prize” – pray that I will be willing to pay the prize (in diligent study)?

WHAT IS A PARABLE?

We should all read the whole passage (Mar 4:1-25) today! Read it and see whether you understand the passage. Doesn't it appear rather simple? Oh, we've heard this parable numerous times – after all, it's probably the most well-known parable in the Bible – the Parable of the Sower.

Now focus on the 2 verses Mark 4:11-12: "... Unto you it is given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God: but unto them that are without, all these things are done in parables: That seeing they may see, and not perceive; and hearing they may hear, and not understand; lest at any time they should be converted, and their sins should be forgiven them."

Now you can tell yourself – it's tough! You probably would respond like the Jews in Capernaum, after they've heard the Lord's teaching in John 6, "Many therefore of his disciples, when they had heard this, said, This is an hard saying; who can hear it?" (Joh 6:60)

Our Lord loves parables! What is a parable? One definition is: "a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought." In the parables, Jesus uses earthly things (seeds, sower, coins, sheep etc) to illustrate heavenly truths. Some of these parables are easy to interpret, some can be real tough. We'll deal with the parable of the Good Samaritan in due time.

Back to the question today. How do we explain this hard saying ("That seeing they may see, and not perceive"). A little personal story might help – when I was a non-believer, I used to mark my Bible with question marks all over – I saw, I heard, but I did not perceive, I did not understand, and my foolish heart was hardened even more – till the Holy Spirit opened my heart and understanding...

Application – "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (Heb 11:1)

THOUGHT: "And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart" (Jer 29:13).

PRAYER: Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief.

MONDAY, MAY 7

Exodus 15:1-19
Memorise Exodus 15:1

"Then sang Moses and the children of Israel this song unto the LORD..."

ARE THERE GENRES WITHIN GENRES?

The book of Exodus is largely a narrative, but there are passages of poetry in it. In Exodus 14:30, we read: "Thus the LORD saved Israel that day out of the hand of the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead upon the sea shore" ...thus in response, "Then sang Moses and the children of Israel this song unto the LORD" (Exo 15:1)

The passage today is also called "The Song of Moses". This song was sung immediately after God saved the children of Israel, and the Egyptian army all drowned in the Red Sea – you can imagine the great joy of the Israelites! – of course, they'll break out into a song!

Doesn't this remind you of Psalm 126:1-2? "When the LORD turned again the captivity of Zion, we were like them that dream. Then was our mouth filled with laughter, and our tongue with singing: then said they among the heathen, The LORD hath done great things for them"

Can you think of other poems inside a narrative book?

Read chapter 1 and 2 of the Gospel of Luke, where we find three hymns of praise!

1. Magnificat (Luke 1:46-56) – Mary praised God for His favor
2. Benedictus (Luke 1:67-79) – Zacharias praised God for giving him a son, John the Baptist, in his old age
3. Nunc Dimittis (Luke 2:28-32) – Simeon praised God for allowing him to see His Lord Jesus

What about Phil 2:5-11? This lovely passage is also called "Carmen Christi" (Hymn of Christ). Doesn't our precious Saviour deserve such an exalted poem?

Application – Many of us live mundane (prosaic) lives without spark, without fire, just struggling from day to day, doing homework, fulfilling obligations. This is not what God wants for us! The Christian life should be a life of constant gratitude, rejoicing and singing!

THOUGHT: Christians have always been a singing people! How wonderful a God we have!

PRAYER: Lord, pray that I will always be filled with the joy of the Lord, daily!

TUESDAY, MAY 8

Revelation 3:20
Memorise 2 Peter 3:16

“...speaking in them of these things; in which are some things hard to be understood...”

INTERPRETATION OR APPLICATION FIRST?

Sometimes when you read certain devotionals or listen to some messages, there are some who would take a single verse or a few verses and attempt to draw lessons from them that are simply not found in that verse. Perhaps at face value, it does seem like that is what the Bible is teaching. However, when you examine the verse within the context, one would quickly realize that although the application sounds correct, it is based on a wrong interpretation, and therefore not right.

One very common example would be Revelation 3:20, a verse often quoted by those sharing the gospel. They would say that Jesus is standing outside your hearts' door and desires to come in to sup with you. Thus we need to open our heart and welcome Him in, i.e. believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

However if you examine the verse in its context, you would realize that these are words spoken to the lukewarm church at Laodicea. They were believers, and described as those whom the Lord loved and was chastening. They were called to repent and turn back to the Lord. Their problem was their backslidden state, and so the Lord in knocking was sincerely asking them to return to a life of blessed communion with their Lord and Saviour. Thus it is clear that this verse is not for unbelievers but for believers, for those who had become lacklustre in their relationship with God and needed to make room in their hearts for Him once again.

There are many more examples of such misinterpretations of God's Word. Many like these are often well-meaning, and do not really result in any erroneous doctrines. However there are those who in their zeal to make certain applications and give certain lessons really do butcher God's Words and force them to say something that was not intended at all. As a result they mislead believers, and wrest at Scriptures to their own destruction.

Application – Let us be serious in reading our Bible, seeking the help of the Holy Spirit in teaching us to understand His word correctly. When we read the word of God, remember – these are the words of life, the words that give us new life, new birth!

THOUGHT: The Bible says that in Christ, we are “new creatures”. The Word of God is powerful, only if we understand it correctly, and take it seriously!

PRAYER: Lord, thank you that we have thy Word, “a more sure word of prophecy” (1 Peter 1:19).

WEDNESDAY, MAY 9

1 Corinthians 2:11
Memorise 1 Corinthians 2:12

"Now we have received, ...the spirit which is of God..."

WHY MUST I PRAY BEFORE INTERPRETING?

We are indeed very blessed to have wonderful preachers of the Word in our churches. I have personally benefited a great deal learning from them. My pastor has made the Bible so exciting that I have loved it more and more over the years. I have studied the Bible with many resources to help me (Bible commentaries etc), but I find that my pastors' interpretation of the Bible is often better than any of the commentaries I have consulted (and I have many of them!).

I have often listened to his expositions and asked myself, "why can he see things that we can't?" – has he studied harder than us? (yes, of course) – is he smarter than us? (he denies it!) – does he have any special formulae, any secrets? (he says - no!) So, I asked him directly one day. He seemed genuinely puzzled for a moment, and was at a loss for words. Finally, he said, "it must be the Holy Spirit". I thought about it for a while, and I concluded that "yes, he's right".

The classical passage on the why we need the Holy Spirit to understand the Bible is of course in 1 Corinthians 2. How did Paul preach? Here we read, "And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power" (1 Cor 2:4).

How did he come to understand, in such a profound way, God's truth? "For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him? even so the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God". (1 Cor 2:11)

Can you also remember the encounter of two disciples with our Lord on the road to Emmaus (after His resurrection)? They were still at a loss as to the meaning of all the recent events. Our Lord opened their eyes! "And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself" (Luke 24:27). The two disciples only have Lord Jesus for a few hours to teach them. But we have the Spirit of God to be with us always as our teacher!

Application – Read, Pray and Grow!

THOUGHT: Paul says in 1 Cor 2:16, "But we have the mind of Christ". What does he mean? Can we really have the mind of Christ?

PRAYER: Open my eyes that I may see, glimpses of truth thou hast for me.

THURSDAY, MAY 10

Luke 10:29-37
Memorise John 2:19

“Jesus answered... Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up”

HOW DO I SEE THE CONTEXT?

For the next eleven days, we shall work hard on learning how to interpret the Bible, using the parable of the Samaritan as a case study.

You may remember our lesson two days ago about the importance of knowing the context of a particular passage so that we can interpret the passage correctly? Also, we saw earlier on also how the wrong method of interpretation can lead to a very unnatural explanation of this passage.

So, today, we ask ourselves – what is the context of the parable of the Good Samaritan? Why did Jesus tell the parable?

In Luke 10:29, we read, “But he, willing to justify himself, said unto Jesus, And who is my neighbour?” The context is Jesus’ answer to the question by a lawyer (also called scribes). These are not the same as modern day lawyers, but experts in religious laws. We can also see them as theologians. In debating with Jesus,

Our Lord then tells the parable of the Good Samaritan. By the end of the parable, we can answer the question “Who is his neighbour?”

The punchline or surprise of the parable is that the despised Samaritan was the one who acted in the most neighbourly manner, not the priest nor the Levite. Thus the conclusion was that everyone is considered a neighbour, and thus we ought to treat everyone so.

With this understanding, we will explore the parable over the next 10 days!

Application – How do we know the context of a passage? Work hard! Know your bible well – not only a particular verse, but the passage itself, the chapter, the book, and the whole Bible itself!

THOUGHT: “The New Testament is in the Old Testament concealed, the Old Testament is in the New Testament revealed” (Augustine)

PRAYER: Lord, your Word is a limitless treasure. Please help me to work hard to understand thy Word, so that I can love you more and more each day, and glorify thee in my life.

"And he said, Unto you it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God..."

HOW DO I SEE THE AUDIENCE?

In the verse today, it is interesting to see that an expert in the law of Moses asking Jesus about the law ("Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life). Jesus replied with a question, which he answered correctly. Then we come to Luke 10:29, "But he, willing to justify himself, said unto Jesus, And who is my neighbour?"

The question today is: How do I see the intended audience of the parable? Or more importantly, after identifying the audience, what more should I know about him?

Firstly, he is a Jew. He is a typical Jew of his day, self-righteous in his attitudes and despises everybody else who is not a Jew, and who particularly hates the Samaritans. He considers himself far superior to the heathen Samaritan who do not worship the true God.

Secondly, this Jew is a lawyer, an expert in religious law. This is interesting, as the lawyer asked Jesus about the law (of Moses)! His very profession is the study and interpretation of the Torah, what we know as the Old Testament. He has practically spent his whole life dedicated to the Book!

Thirdly, why did the lawyer asked Jesus about the law? Verse 25 said that "a certain lawyer stood up, and tempted him". So Jesus knew that the lawyer's question is "loaded" – he "tempted" Jesus with his question – he tried to "catch" Jesus out, hoping Jesus' answer would contradict the Word of God. Also, verse 29 says, "But he, willing to justify himself, said unto Jesus, And who is my neighbour?" The lawyer couldn't contradict Jesus, but he still wanted to show that he is right.

These are just some initial clues that we need to identify to help us to fully understand the parable before us.

Application – To understand a particular biblical passage, we often have to understand it from the view of the intended audience, for it is through their eyes that we would be better able to understand what is going on.

THOUGHT: Does a disciplined imagination play an important role in helping us to understand the Word of God?

PRAYER: Lord, help me to think more, as I read your Word!

“...Even as Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.”

WHY MUST I LOOK FOR PARALLEL PASSAGES?

There are times when we must NOT only look for parallel passages, but we must read a whole passage (instead of just one verse) to read it in context. Here, particularly – this is one of the loveliest passages in the Bible – we should read the whole passage: verses 24:13-32. After reading this, close your eyes, and imagine the scene! – yes, don't you wish you were one of the two disciples, being taught by our Lord Jesus himself the art of hermeneutics! Yes, the whole Bible (including the Old Testament) points to Jesus.

Jesus must have taught them the lesson we're learning today – to look for parallel passages in the Bible!

In the parable of the Good Samaritan, the lawyer's answers to Jesus' questions came from the Old Testament:

1. The lawyer said in answer to the question, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself”. This comes from Deuteronomy 6:5, and is part of the “Shema Yisrael” (Deut 6:4-9) which is a centerpiece of the morning and evening Jewish prayer services.
2. The second part of the answer comes from Lev 19:18: “Thou shalt not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself: I am the LORD”.

The Bible has 66 books with different human authors, but there is only one divine author behind all the books – the Holy Spirit. So it's important to know the parallel passages, particularly if the original passage is not easy to understand – often the parallel passages will help us to understand the more difficult passages.

Application – We should know the whole Bible! Don't say you're too young – start now, and don't miss the blessings!

THOUGHT: “Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth” (2 Tim 2:15).

PRAYER: Lord, I thank you for such a wonderful book that fills my heart with love and hope and joy daily!

SUNDAY, MAY 13

Luke 10:36
Memorise 1 Corinthians 10:11
"...they are written for our admonition..."

HOW DO I SEE THE MAIN POINT OF THE PASSAGE?

Luke 10:36: "Which now of these three, thinkest thou, was neighbour unto him that fell among the thieves?"

Why did Jesus tell the parable of the Good Samaritan? It is obviously in answer to the lawyer's question, "And who is my neighbor?" Now (after finishing the parable), Jesus asked him, "Which now of these three, thinkest thou, was neighbour unto him that fell among the thieves?"

So that main point is obviously the "definition" of "neighbour".

The Jews during Jesus' time were very proud people. Even though they had been living under the subjugation of foreigners for many hundreds of years, they still thought that they were superior to all other races, whether Greeks, the Romans or Samaritans. They particularly detested and looked down upon the Samaritans. This is blatant racism!

So, our Lord Jesus was teaching the lawyer, "forget your petty Jewish laws, forget your prejudices – this is a new era! – you should consider everybody as your neighbor i.e. you should love and help everybody, regardless of race or religion". It must have been a shocking statement to the proud lawyer!

This reminds me of the passage in Matthew 18:21-22, when Peter asked Jesus, "how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Till seven times?" Peter is so much like us – we try to shirk God's command and limit its scope! But God wants us to abandon ourselves to His love and His mercy, and stop bargaining with Him! That's the only way to live a life "more abundant and free"!

Application – Stop bargaining with God. Learn to have "the mind of Christ" – read Philippians 2:1-16 ("Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus")

THOUGHT: "If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed" (John 8:36).

PRAYER: Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart.

MONDAY, MAY 14

Luke 10:33
Memorise Mark 7:3

“...except they wash their hands oft, eat not, holding the tradition of the elders”

HOW DO I ANALYSE THE CULTURAL BACKGROUND?

The end of 2 Corinthians has this verse, “Greet one another with a holy kiss”. Should we follow this, and kiss one another in church? – Paul would say, “oh no! You’re Singaporeans! Most of you are Chinese! When you greet one another, just smile and say hello – it’s good enough! Maybe a little handshake! But kiss? Everybody will be staring at you in shocked incomprehension!”

When I was working in Australia and was worshipping in a church where everybody else was white Australian, it took me some time to get used to the huggings and kissings! It’s in their culture, not ours.

Now back to the parable. We will understand it fully only if we know about the Jews, the Levites, the priests and the Samaritans (and also some geography!) So all of us must do some homework if we love God’s word and want to understand it well!

We have discussed the Samaritans yesterday – they are despised and hated by the Jews. What about the Levites – they are members of the respected tribe of Levi, who are appointed by God to work in the temple (so they are like full-time workers). And the priests? They are the descendents of Aaron (also of the tribe of Levi) who act as intermediaries between God and the Jews, especially when the ordinary Jews come to the temple to offer sacrifice to God – they’re even more respected than the Levites.

So you can imagine the shock that greeted the poor lawyer – the shocking tale Jesus was telling – the Samaritan is behaving in a way much better than the Levite and the priest!

What’s happening? We’ll learn by and by!

Application – Know the word of God well, and learn some geography and history (of the background of biblical times)

THOUGHT: Many people misunderstand the Bible – one reason is that they are too lazy to learn the cultural background. Dear teen – Don’t be lazy!

PRAYER: “Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth” (2 Tim 2:15).

TUESDAY, MAY 15

Luke 10:34
Memorise Matthew 13:17

“if any man have ears to hear, let him hear”

WHAT IS INCIDENTAL DETAIL?

Luke 10:34: “And went to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine, and set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him.”

Read the paragraph below (a famous interpretation of the Parable of the Good Samaritan) – do you agree with this interpretation?

“The man who was going down is Adam. Jerusalem is paradise, and Jericho is the world. The robbers are hostile powers. The priest is the Law, the Levite is the prophets, and the Samaritan is Christ. The wounds are disobedience, the beast is the Lord’s body, the pandochium (that is, the stable [inn]), which accepts all [pan-] who wish to enter, is the Church. And further, the two denarii mean the Father and the Son. The manager of the stable is the head of the Church, to whom its care has been entrusted. And the fact that the Samaritan promises he will return represents the Savior’s second coming.”

This sort of interpretation is called the allegorical method. It sounds interesting. It sounds very clever, and it may even sound very convincing. But is it true? Is it the correction interpretation?

No so! Just think – this interpretation just depends on the interpreter’s ingenuity – you can interpret it your way, I can do it my own way, and who’s to say who’s right and who’s wrong? This is abuse of scripture!

So what about the beast, the wine, the oil, the inn, the innkeeper, and the two pence? These are just incidental details – our Lord is a master storyteller, and these details keep us engaged in the story!

Remember – the parable is not just theology – it’s a story too!

Application – Read the Bible – yes, but read it “smartly”! Do not try to imagine meaning out of every single detail you see. Instead focus on the main point and the purpose behind the parable.

THOUGHT: How do we know what are incidental details and what are important details? It takes hard work, and much prayer! – that’s how we grow to have more and more of “the mind of Christ” day by day!

PRAYER: Lord, give me a heart of love that I will treasure all thy words!

WEDNESDAY, MAY 16

Luke 10:37
Memorise Matthew 23:23

“...law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done...”

HOW DO I LOOK FOR KEY WORDS OR PHRASES?

Luke 10:36-37” “Which now of these three, thinkest thou, was neighbour unto him that fell among the thieves? And he said, He that shewed mercy on him. Then said Jesus unto him, Go, and do thou likewise”.

Remember that our Lord Jesus told this parable to answer the question, “who is my neighbour?”

What’s your answer to the question today? What are the key words in this passage. They are “He that showed mercy on him”. Jesus then added to it advice “Go, and do thou likewise”.

Did you notice that the lawyer refused to even pronounce the word “Samaritan”? But he had no choice but to admit that he should not confine the idea of neighbor to only his fellow Jews!

This is tough! – to consider your “enemy” (Samaritans and Gentiles) as your neighbour! You can see how tough it is when you read the Book of Acts! Remember the story of how Peter went to see Cornelius? Even though the Bible has promised that the gospel would be preached to the Gentiles, Peter was still very reluctant to break the Jewish dietary laws, and God had to give him a vision to turn him around!

But poor Peter, he was still a coward in some ways. Years later, when he went to Antioch, he was afraid of offending some of the Jews from Jerusalem. What did he do? “He withdrew and separated himself, fearing them which were of the circumcision” (Gal 2:12) – and he was publicly reprimanded by Paul – Paul wasn’t being rude, but He loved God and the gospel, and the gospel was at stake!

So who are our neighbors? We should stop asking such questions, and open our hearts to everybody – just like our loving God.

Application – Pay attention when you read the Bible! Focus on key points!

THOUGHT: Don’t major on minors!

PRAYER: Lord, open my eyes and ears to know what is important, and what is peripheral.

THURSDAY, MAY 17

Luke 10:30
Memorise Matthew 5:18

“...one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled”

HOW DO I LOOK FOR CONNECTING WORDS?

Luke 10:30: “And Jesus answering said, A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, which stripped him of his raiment, and wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead.”

Our Contact Group has been studying the Book of Romans. We had been going through Chapters 1, 2 and the first part of chapter 3 over many months, and were all looking to the BIG TURNING POINT!

In the early chapters of Romans, the apostle Paul convinced us thoroughly that “all have sinned”. Now on to Romans 3:21, “But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested”. “But now” are two little words that make a BIG BANG! – from the doom and gloom of universal sin to the wonders of salvation! Just to read these two little words “But now” rejoices the heart!

Now we get back to the parable of the Good Samaritan. In v 10:30, we have the little connecting word, “And”! – this is the first important turning point in the parable! When we read this, we shake our head vigorously, we re-tune our brains, and tell ourselves – it’s time to switch track! – onto the body (main part) of the parable.

Now turn to the wonderful Book of Romans again and read some other magnificent “connecting words”: “Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom 5:1)

“There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit” (Rom 8:1) – notice here that “There is” is in italics in KJV – meaning that these two words are not in the original Greek. So here we have another connecting word “therefore”.

As you know God’s word more and more, you get to love these “therefores”, “but”, “notwithstanding”, and often just simple “for” and “and”! – look out for them! – and you’ll understand and rejoice in the Word of God more and more!

THOUGHT: The more we love God, the more we’ll love His word. The more we love His word, the more we’ll love God!

PRAYER: Lord, teach me to love thy Word more and more each day.

FRIDAY, MAY 18

Luke 10:30-37
Memorise 2 Timothy 2:15

"Study to shew thyself approved unto God, ...rightly dividing the word of truth"

HOW DO I OUTLINE THE PASSAGE?

God is a God of order, and he had made us such that all of us appreciate some degree of order in our environment.

It's the same with our minds. When we read the Bible, we often have to organise the passage, so that we can understand it better. One way to do this is to outline the passage.

Now read Luke 10:30-37. How would you outline the passage?

This is a narrative passage, and so it should have a beginning, the main body, and an end – simple. Yes, it's simple - but consciously knowing this helps us to understand the passage better.

Who is my neighbour?

V. 30 - The Hapless Man

V. 31-32 - The Unhelpful Religious Men

V. 33-35 - The Helpful Samaritan

V. 36-37 - Are we Helpful Neighbours?

The idea of outlining a passage may appear to be a no-brainer, but very often we are too lazy to do so, and so miss much valuable lessons. Have you learned the theory of entropy? It says that the things tend to go from an initial orderly state to an ultimately disorderly state! I confess my brain is often in a state of disorderliness, and so I have to work hard to get things organized, outlined – it's worth all the hard work!

Application – If you find a passage difficult to understand, it often helps to read it again, and outline the passage to give you some landmarks!

THOUGHT: Some people are blessed with naturally orderly minds – thank God. Some minds are naturally “untidy” – we have to work hard to tidy our minds up, then!

PRAYER: Lord, forgive me for the many times I take Thy word lightly.

WHAT MUST I BEAR IN MIND IN APPLICATION?

The lawyer in this account sounds very much like many of us. He knows all the right answers, and can quote whole chunks of the Bible like a breeze! This is his reply to Jesus when questioned about the law: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself." Notice what Jesus said in reply? "Thou hast answered right: this do, and thou shalt live."

Now stop – and think! If you were the lawyer, how would you go on? How do you apply the verse to yourself? You have quoted the verse ("thou shalt love the Lord thy God..."), but can you apply it to yourself? The lawyer obviously ignored Jesus' exhortation, but instead continued to try to challenge Jesus. For him, it was but an intellectual debate, and he had no interest in applying what he had just learnt.

How about for us? Why do we spend so much time trying to understand the Bible? When we understand passages, and think of the applications, we must always follow up with a true sincere desire to do all that God's Word instructs us to. Yet in doing that, we also realize that as much as we can try to apply it by ourselves, we can't! We'd just kneel down to Jesus and say, "Lord, I don't love God with even half my heart... soul... strength... mind, and I can't! – unless You help me through thy Holy Spirit!"

The question today is "what must I bear in mind in application"? I think the most important thing to bear in mind is that we must not just say, but do! Yet realize that we are unable to apply any of these lessons in our lives unless we are given the strength by the Holy Spirit. It is us working in conjunction with God - we desire to obey, and the Holy Spirit gives us the strength and resolve to be able to do so.

Application – It's no point understanding the Bible "intellectually", but not applying the lessons to our own lives.

THOUGHT: Thank God for good pastors/teachers who help us to understand the Word of God, and teach us how to apply it to our lives!

PRAYER: Lord, help me not only to memorise bible verses, but to understand them and work in my heart and soul so that I will love you more in spirit and in truth.

"My son, hear the instruction of thy father, and forsake not the law of thy mother"

HOW DO I APPLY IT TO MYSELF?

We have gone on a long journey, learning how to interpret the Bible. But I fear that we may lose sight of the ultimate purpose of doing all these – all to the glory of God. We must apply all the lessons from the Bible to ourselves, otherwise we might as well go and play ball!

As we read, meditate and understand God's Word, and as we humble ourselves and yield to the instructions within, what would happen is that we would be transformed by the renewing of our mind. That is what the Bible should do to you! If we read it seriously, and constantly ask what lessons that are to be had, and sincerely try to live by it, our thoughts will be refreshed by the teachings in God's Words; our lives will be transformed, conformed to the image of Christ and not the world. The result of this would be a life that is good and acceptable in the sight of God! Now don't we all want this to happen in our lives?

Some teens dye their hair and think that they are non-conformists! Yes, to an extent that's true – but that applies only to their external appearance. What about the "internals"? Here – the true Christians are the true non-conformists. We don't rebel for the sake of rebellion, but we don't conform to the world – Why? - because we want to conform to the God who loves us! – an be transformed "internally" (by the renewing of our minds – that's what matters, not the externals!)

Why do we want to do this?

Because we love Him, who first loved us. We want to please Him, and so we want to know His will (which is "good, and acceptable and perfect"). That takes a life-time – because our mind, our emotion, and our will have all been corrupted as part of the Fall, and it takes more than a lifetime (and beyond) to fully conform ourselves to His image.

But we want to start now, and grow more and more Christ-like each day – we can start practically by reading, understanding and obeying His word daily! What an exciting journey!

THOUGHT: Jesus said, "if ye love me, keep my commandments"

PRAYER: Lord, help me to let thy Word be so much a part of me that I will love what you love, and do what you want me to do.

WHAT DOES MEDITATION MEAN?

To meditate is to think deeply and carefully about God's Word for an extended period of time. It is to dwell on it, to contemplate it, study it, turn it around in your mind. Such deep thinking will often be done in silent seclusion, away and undisturbed from the hustle and bustle around us.

For the Christian, meditation consists of the following:

1. A spiritual mind – only a spiritual person will delight in the law of the Lord. An unbeliever may study the Word and find it most interesting and agreeable, but his knowledge will be academic and not a delight to his soul.
2. Spiritual matters - meditation is often used in relation to religious, spiritual thought. You would not refer to studying your academic texts as meditation, no matter how intense and rigorous the study may be. There is a higher purpose, when we meditate upon the Law – the inspired, inerrant, infallible Word of God!
3. Time – deep thinking and contemplation of the Word requires an extended period of time. Here the Psalmist meditates day and night.

Meditation also requires a mind wholly devoted, focused on God's Word. To meditate is not to mindlessly repeat or recite God's Word but mindful contemplation that permeates and transforms the soul.

Application – So now that you know what meditation means, have you ever truly done it? Do you delight in reading God's Word, or is it a chore? If we say we delight in God's Word but we do not think about it often and in depth, are we truly meditating? The foods we like, we will eat slowly and savour each bite, each chew, focusing on it. Our favourite subjects and hobbies – we think about them and do them above and beyond what is necessary. Our thoughts will wander easily to them. Favourite novels – we read over and over again, dwelling on and relishing each word, phrase, and sentence. How about the Word of God?

THOUGHT: What adjective describes this man in Psalm 1 who delights in God's Word and meditates upon in all the time? Is meditating easy? Does it come naturally?

PRAYER: May I love God's Word and meditate upon it.

TUESDAY, MAY 22

Psalm 119:99
Memorise Psalm 119:27

"Thy testimonies also are my delight and my counselors."

WHY MUST WE MEDITATE?

In this verse, the result of David's constant meditation of the testimonies of God as recorded in Scripture, is greater understanding than his teachers the priests. It is not the objective per se. He does not meditate to compete with them but rather because he loves the Law and it has preserved him from his enemies that are ever with him, and the evil way that so easily befalls.

For a Christian, the acquisition of Bible knowledge is just the beginning and alone incomplete. Understanding is comprehending knowledge so that it may be applied, the result of which is wisdom. We meditate so that we may understand. Meditation is not for the sake of being religiously pious.

Application - Each Christian has his own race to run. Leaders, teachers, spiritual friends and mentors are but instruments to instruct and help us to gain understanding of God's Word. But their understanding, however great, can only help us so far. They cannot see into your heart. Thus in this way, their understanding is limited and will not transform your life. As Matthew Henry writes, meditating is preaching to yourself that you may come to understand your own heart. It is to experience God in a real and personal way. The counsel of others cannot replace direct counsel from the very Word itself which each of us must study, and discern for ourselves.

If a student is to gain more spiritual understanding than his teacher, a teacher ought to be pleased and himself spurred to study and meditate upon the Word more. Consider also the strength of a Christian who's understanding is heavily dependent on another? It's all very well when that person is spiritual and present in your life. But even leaders backslide. They also come and go. Is this the foundation upon which a Christian seeking wisdom wishes to build his faith?

THOUGHT: Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and forever. (Heb 13:8)

PRAYER: Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law. (Ps 119:18)

WHEN DO WE MEDITATE?

After the death of Moses, God commissions Joshua with the daunting task – to conquer and enter the Promised Land. As Joshua assumes leadership of the Israelites, God instructs Joshua with a command, that the laws of Moses shall not depart from his mouth.

Joshua is to keep the law within him. The Word to a Christian is spiritual food, essential for life. Meditating upon it is like tasting, chewing, savouring and digesting it. In this manner it does not depart from us, but remains within to nourish and transform. At the same time, our mouths are one of the chief means by which we exhibit wisdom we have gleaned from the Word of God to edify others.

To meditate therein day and night does not mean literally all the time. Joshua would have had many tasks to do preparing, instructing and organizing the people. All the more he would have needed the wisdom to fulfill his calling and seek out opportunities to meditate upon the Word. This he was to do all the time – continually, during the day – at work when he was the busiest but also at night when he would be likely at rest. It is continual in the sense that there is this complete and unceasing reliance and abiding in Christ and His Word. To stop would be rely on his own strength and wisdom.

Application - Too often the Word of God is something we just gloss over. At best we may memorise a verse or two. But true and constant meditation is something we fail far short of achieving. Meditation does not come naturally. It not only requires love of God's Word, it takes discipline.

Further, we are commanded to meditate constantly we go about our daily lives. It is not optional. In our interactions, actions, decisions and reactions we ought to be always reflecting, and then acting or reacting in the light of God's Word. Or whenever we have a spare moment from our activities or work. In this way, we are meditating all the time. Do you wonder why you do not grow spiritually or show scant improvement?

THOUGHT: What are practical steps I can take to meditate more?

PRAYER: LORD, give me the discipline to obey your command to meditate continually upon Your Word.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF MEDITATION?

An awesome task and responsibility had been entrusted to Joshua. It would require great faith and wisdom. First, knowledge had been imparted, then understanding, finally, application. The culmination of continual meditation is action, that we, like Joshua may do the will of God in our lives.

The result of doing all of God’s will in complete obedience is prosperity and success. Verse 8b reiterates what is in verse 7b. God will give them His best blessings. For Joshua, his task was clear - and that is the conquest of the Promised Land. In order for his mission to be successful, he was to abide continually in the Word of God. As long as he obeyed, the Lord would bless him and help him fight his battles. However, the moment disobedience and sin crept into the camp (e.g. in the sin of Achan, they lost the battle of Ai, or when they did not seek God’s will they succumbed to the deceit of the Gibeonites), they would be punished.

Likewise for us, the same principles apply. Of course in our day and age, blessings are no longer tied closely to physical blessings, as it was in the Old Testament times. Our mission today is spiritual in nature, and likewise blessings are spiritual as well. As long as we abide in God’s Word, we will be blessed, and granted success in our spiritual battles. God our Father is always watching over us from heaven, and will always give His children what is best for them, as long as they obey His Word.

Application – God promised Joshua success in his battles ahead against the Canaanites despite the odds. We too can claim this promise now in present trials and tribulations, and for those that will invariable strew our path ahead. We are forgetful creatures and so prone to stray. Continual meditation upon God’s Word reminds us of our weakness and our dependence on God. It instructs us and gives us strength and faith to live obedient and hence victorious Christian lives.

THOUGHT: How many times does the ‘be strong and of good courage’ occur in this chapter?

PRAYER: May I do Your will LORD and not be swayed to the left nor the right to claim Your divine and best blessings.

FRIDAY, MAY 25

Psalm 119:97
Memorise Psalm 139:23-24

"Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts..."

HOW DO I KNOW IF I AM MEDITATING CORRECTLY?

The new division in Psalm 119 opens with the psalmist unreservedly declaring his ardent love for the law. It is not just any law, but the law of God. It is of such intense love so much so that it is his meditation at all times. This is a man in love with God's Word. He cannot but help delight and meditate upon it. Meditation involves not only the mind but also the heart.

Application – We can imagine being in love, if we have not already experienced it. Practically every waking moment will be consumed with thoughts of the object of your affection. You will think about him or her incessantly and seek to know every little thing about them. You will study and appreciate all their strengths, weaknesses and quirks. Time spent with them passes all too quickly.

How do you feel about the Word of God, really. How many of us can say we love it, let alone are in love with it? Do we really appreciate what it means to love the Lord with all your heart and soul like the Psalmist here?

Do you love reading and studying the Word? Whilst you may find some parts to be interesting, practical and comforting, do you feel some other parts to be tedious, difficult, boring, or even irrelevant? Or perhaps you once loved the Word but the love has grown cold or been replaced by the things of the world... or clouded by sin?

Can meditation be correct that results from such a heart? Dear teen, how is your heart? The condition of your heart will tell you whether you are meditating correctly.

THOUGHT: Is indifference or sin clouding your ability to know, understand and apply God's Word?

PRAYER: May I meditate upon your Word with clean hands and a pure heart.

SATURDAY, MAY 26

*Jeremiah 15:16
Memorise Proverbs 11:2*

“When pride cometh, then cometh shame but with the lowly is wisdom.”

SHOULD I MEDITATE EVEN IF THE PASSAGE IS EASY?

After you spend a certain amount of time in church, there would be those few passages that would be mentioned again and again, and they would quickly become very familiar to you. Many of them are quite straightforward and simple to understand, and they would be what we regard as ‘easy’ passages. Though they are indeed very wonderful and precious verses, yet because of familiarity, we seldom think too much upon them - we don’t think that verses like these need to much meditation as we already understand them.

But we should stop and ask - do we really understand everything there is to know about these old favourites?

Jeremiah was a prophet specifically called by the LORD to an awesome and difficult task to tell of the ruin of his beloved nation. This was a message that was not well received by the stiff-necked people. God spoke to Jeremiah directly who was undoubtedly also spiritually knowledgeable as the voice of God to the people, yet what was Jeremiah’s attitude to the Word of God?

He spoke of how he found the words of God, and carefully chew on them and ingested them. As a result he found them to be the joy of his heart! Although the task set before him was immense and onerous, he never blamed God but instead took refuge in the familiar but yet wonderfully rich words of God.

Application – True, there are passages and books in the Bible that are more readily understandable. But do not take God’s Word for granted and the ability of familiar passages to reveal spiritual food to you again and again. Is knowledge of God exhaustible? Can we come to a complete knowledge of God? If you do not think you are not hungry, will you want to eat and hence be filled? To think of a passage as easy is to begin to be filled with self and to become complacent.

THOUGHT: David and Jeremiah meditated upon the Word constantly. How much more so should we?

PRAYER: David and Jeremiah meditated upon the Word, how much more so should we?

DOES MEDITATION ONLY FOCUS ON ONE PASSAGE?

In this Psalm, David first looks back and reflects on God's faithfulness. Whether "the days of old" refers to God's faithfulness in David's life and/or God's people as recorded is not clear. He then meditates on all God's present work that he sees. God is everywhere, to be found in everything, great and small, by divine revelation in His Word, the miracle of life and His daily provisions. Finally, David looks wider to the natural world as he reflects in wonder at God's work revealed in creation.

Application – Perhaps you may be experiencing trials and tribulations, and as you read His Word you are fearful and doubtful. David's spirit was overwhelmed and desolate under the attacks of his enemies. Hence in his meditation he casts a wide net to fill his thirsty soul. Remembering the past accorded comfort, of God's faithfulness in His dealings with His children, whilst the works of creation testify of God's continual presence and power in all things. This we can see if we would but look!

At the same time, the Word of God is so rich and so deep that we may wish to focus on just one passage, or a verse, or even part of a verse. Just as an entire sermon can be expounded from one verse, your meditation for a whole day can too. From this you will be able to delve deeper and maybe be able to extract greater and more lasting spiritual understanding than if you were to meditate on several verses or passages. This takes focus and discipline.

Whether you focus on one passage or several depends on the purpose and circumstances of your meditation. Just as we need both a micro and macro understanding of the Bible – Bible theology (which studies the Bible from the historical perspective of revelation through individual books) as well as systematic theology (thematic perspective).

THOUGHT: Spurgeon calls memory the handmaiden of hope. Can you do so too?

PRAYER: LORD, may my faith be strengthened as I remember Your faithfulness and see Your presence always in all things.

MONDAY, MAY 28

Psalm 119:23
Memorise Psalm 119:65

“Great peace have they which love thy law: and nothing shall offend them.”

WHAT SHOULD I BEAR IN MIND DURING MEDITATION?

The identity of the Psalmist is uncertain; some attribute it to David, others to Ezra. What we do know is that princes, people who were noble rulers, were speaking against the psalmist. It was not just one prince, but numerous. The idea of them ‘sitting’ gives the impression they were gathered together. Yet, amidst all these attacks from influential people, whose words carry weight and power, we find the Psalmist strangely still. He does not take things into his own hands, nor look to man. Instead he meditates upon the Word of God, unperturbed.

Application – When people sin against us or when things go wrong and we are afraid, our natural reaction is to do something or talk to someone. We simply must! Furthermore, in our fast paced world we are bombarded by messages to ‘seize the day’, ‘be proactive’ and that we are the master of our own destiny. Meditating and praying? This is not a time for inaction! Foolishness! Meditate and pray later.

But reconsider: is it inaction to be still, shutting out all that is going on around you, searching and meditating upon God’s Word for wisdom and submitting your prayers humbly before the Throne of Grace? These are deliberate things that the Psalmist does – he retreats to somewhere quiet where he meditates on the perfect Word. It is his counselor. He seeks God’s will and wisdom, prays and meditates before the Lord. He bides his time and calms his soul. He encourages himself in the Lord. Only then, will he act.

We ought to meditate all the more during difficult circumstances, and as we do, we must be unwavering, focused, not letting fears and sin cloud our ability to genuinely understand and apply God’s Word.

THOUGHT: Do the sins of others bring out good or evil in you?

PRAYER: LORD may I find calm and guidance in Your Word in the midst of the storms of life.

TUESDAY, MAY 29

Psalm 19:14
Memorise Psalm 19:12
"Who can understand his errors?..."

WHAT SHOULD MY ATTITUDE BE DURING MEDITATION?

Our outward actions – what comes out of our mouths and the inward thoughts and intents of our hearts need to be aligned. The visible and invisible must be one and the same - sincere. A good heart will be reflected outwardly. But a deceitful heart can reflect both bad and good – such good is not really good in the sight of God who sees our heart like no man, even our own selves. Our God is an all-seeing God.

It is the words of Jehovah, our strength and author of salvation that we are meditating upon and to Him alone our meditation must be acceptable. He is our creator, rock who gives us His feeble creatures strength, who sent His Son to redeem us who were once condemned from our sins. Our God is a God worthy of worship.

Application – It is relatively easy to say and then do the 'right' things to portray a spiritual Christian or to please others. We often do the right things because we know it's the right thing to do, but inwardly our hearts do not feel quite the opposite, or are half hearted. Such an attitude is unacceptable. We must not delude ourselves thinking we can hide anything from God. He sees into the utmost recesses of our hearts, things that we may not want to admit even to ourselves or may not even be aware of because we deceive ourselves.

We need to remember what we are meditating upon – The perfect, pure and righteous Word of God. Further, we, sinners as we meditate are communing with and before the holy and almighty LORD. Our attitude should be one of humility, reverence and worship.

THOUGHT: What is a presumptuous sin? (See Ps 19:13)

PRAYER: May my heart be pure and free of all sin when I meditate upon your perfect and holy Word.

ARE MY OWN THOUGHTS THAT IMPORTANT?

A man bids his guest to partake of his feast of bread and delicious meats. He calls his guests to eat and drink – enjoy! He wishes his guest well and generously welcomes to his table to sup. On the outward, he initially appears very warm and genuine, happy to be the host. However, that is not how he really is. His heart is not with the guests, and it soon gives him away. He is what his heart says, not his mouth. He is dishonest and insincere, and such actions do not bode well for the guests at all. As Matthew Henry writes, we are really both to God and man that which we are inwardly. Though this guest may be able to discern the heart of his host, his insincerity will have effect, causing the guest to “vomit up” what he has eaten (v8).

Application – As we are what we think in our hearts, yes, your own thoughts are important when meditating. If our heart is not sincere and free from sin or hidden agendas as we meditate, then the result, the fruits of our meditation will be tainted however righteous and pleasing they may appear to be. We need to be totally and completely honest before God and men, lest we be hypocrites as the Pharisees.

We can guard against hypocrisy by putting on the mind of Christ, (Phil 2) molding and aligning our thoughts to that of Christ. This is a lifelong process. In this light, our thoughts are not paramount, they are submitted to and subsumed by Christ's.

Remember God always knows the thoughts of our hearts. We may be able to fool men, but we can never fool God. We can put up a facade of holiness, we can appear to be regular in our daily devotions and meditations. We can even share and talk about how wonderful our quiet time has been. But if it is not true sincere and honest meditation before the Lord, then it is all in vain.

THOUGHT: Is it more difficult to control your thoughts or your actions?

PRAYER: LORD, may I put on the mind of Christ as I meditate upon Your Word.

THURSDAY, MAY 31

*1 Timothy 4:15
Memorise 2 Timothy 3:16-17*

"That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works."

WHAT WOULD BE THE RESULT OF RIGHT MEDITATION BE?

Paul's instruction to the young pastor Timothy was to meditate on all that he has been taught. To give himself entirely to this requires diligence and constancy. Such inward spiritual discipline would certainly yield outward progress in Timothy's life. It would be a life that would profit much, that would visibly bear spiritual fruit as it would "appear" to all around him in all aspects of his life. The result would be an abundant pastoral ministry and a church advancing in the grace and knowledge of the Lord. This would be Timothy's, and any pastor's ultimate goal.

Application - The ultimate goal of meditation does not begin and end with personal growth that remains hidden. We must bear fruit that edifies others and glorifies God. With knowledge and understanding, there must be wisdom manifested by application! Christians are called to be the salt and light of the Earth.

Would a person who truly knows and understand God's Word yet keep to themselves, shunning fellowship, service and Bible study? Or be someone who does not make any progress at all in his spiritual life? Of course not and 'that's certainly not me!' you might say. Perhaps so. Our spiritual progress must appear to all, in all things. Are there people in your life that struggle to be a good testimony to? Somebody whom you find so difficult, or some whom you even consider an enemy? Are there areas in your life that you find easier to be more spiritual and faithful than others? You may be diligent in service at church but slack at home or school. Or perhaps vice versa. Perhaps this is you?

Realize that when we truly meditate on God's Word and apply all that we learn into our lives, it would certainly result in real and effective change in your life. That is the power of the Word of God. Has your life been changed? Can the people around you see it?

THOUGHT: What attributes of the fruit of the spirit do you struggle to exhibit? Are any of these attributes optional?

PRAYER: LORD, may I strive through Your Word to be a good and faithful testimony to all in everything for Your glory.

HOW DO WE INTERPRET NARRATIVES?

In the past 2 months, we have been learning about the basic principles of Biblical interpretation. It is now time to put theory into practice, by going through some case studies of the interpretation of various genres. Over the next few days, we will start off by looking at Ruth 1:1-18 as an example of how we should interpret narratives.

The first and foremost, we must bear in mind that narratives are true stories written by a Divine Author. Often, the danger in reading narratives in the Bible is to treat it as a mere fictional account or a fairytale. As much as they are surely enjoyable and interesting to read, we would lose much of the value of these accounts if we read them just for entertainment. Rather, we must always bear in mind that these are real people (we'll be meeting many of them in heaven!) who lived in real places during a real period of history. Remember also that it is God who inspired every word of these narratives. Hence, rather than just taking them at face value, we must also consider the fact that He who makes no mistakes has carefully chosen what to include and what not to include in each account. As you read, keep asking yourself: What is the purpose of including this narrative in the Bible? What can I learn from it? What is the significance of this event? Why did God choose to include this seemingly minor detail?

Narratives are unique in the sense that the application is not always immediately obvious. Yet, this also means that there are usually multiple takeaway lessons, if we would only put careful thought into reading them. This means not just reading the text itself, but also considering other relevant factors such as: what is the context of this account? Who was the author, and why and to whom did he write it? What happened before and after? Where and when did the events take place? Who are the characters involved? What else do we know about them?

Sounds tough? Perhaps. But the more we read of the Bible, the more we learn to appreciate it and realize that it is truly a living Book full of precious lessons for all who would earnestly and diligently seek out its truths. Dear teen, may you truly find much joy in God's Word even as you continue to learn more about how to study this Book of Books.

THOUGHT: “For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning”.

PRAYER: Lord, help me to understand and appreciate Your Word.

WHAT IS THE CONTEXT OF RUTH 1:1-18?

As we have learned earlier, context is key to a full proper understanding of a text. “A text without context is a pretext” – if we do not properly examine the context of a particular passage, we run the risk of misusing or misapplying the text to support something that it doesn’t actually support. Hence, when interpreting biblical narratives, it is always important to first consider its context.

Ruth 1:1 tells us that the entire story took place “in the days when the judges ruled”. This phrase was included not merely to indicate the time when the events happened, but more as an indication of the spiritual condition during that time. The book of Judges sheds some light on the state of affairs. Judges 17:6 tells us something rather alarming – the days of the judges was a period when “every man did that which was right in his own eyes”. This was one of the lowest points in Israel’s history. Without a king to govern the affairs of the nation, the people lived in a state of lawlessness and anarchy. God’s law was forgotten, and the people turned instead to false gods and indulged in immorality.

What relation does these have to the book of Ruth? First of all, we see God’s justice at work. The famine which sparked off the whole chain of events in the book happened not by chance, but was a result of God’s divine working. God had already warned the Israelites that if they turned away from Him and broke His commandments, their “land shall not yield her increase, neither shall the trees of the land yield their fruits” (Lev 26:14-15, 20). What God has said, He will surely bring to pass, so let us never take what God says lightly. Secondly, the events in Ruth lend a sharp contrast to what was going on in the nation of Israel. While the whole nation of Israel had forsaken the Lord, one sole Gentile girl found faith in the Lord and forsook all to follow Him. And even though Israel was unfaithful to God, yet God in His great mercy continued to be faithful to them, by preserving the line through Ruth and Boaz that would eventually give rise to the Promised Messiah, Jesus Christ!

THOUGHT: Knowing more about the context helps me understand so much more about a passage!

PRAYER: Lord, help me to be diligent in searching Your Word more thoroughly.

HOW DO I SEE THE MAIN POINT OF THIS PASSAGE?

Ruth 1:1-18 is a very interesting passage. Though, on the outset, it appears to be little more than a heartwarming story about family relationships, it is so much more than that.

The passage starts off with a brief description of how the 3 main characters, Ruth, Naomi and Orpah, came to be in the situation in which they find themselves. Stranded in a heathen land with 3 freshly dug graves, 2 Gentile daughters-in-law and nowhere else to turn, Naomi made a decision to return to her homeland in Judah. At the same time, she tried to persuade her 2 daughters-in-law not to go with her, but to remain with their kinsmen in their country. At first, both Ruth and Orpah proclaimed with one accord that they wanted to return with her. However, further coaxing from Naomi revealed their true colours. This brings us to the climax of the story in verse 14, which is how they individually responded ultimately. Orpah's kiss to Naomi was a farewell kiss for she had decided to stay in Moab with her family, while Ruth had decided to cleave unto Naomi and follow her all the way back to Israel.

Choices are what every Christian will have to make at various points in our lives, and this passage teaches us a very important lesson on making choices: a good choice is not necessarily always the best choice. Orpah made the choice to bid farewell to her mother and sister-in-law. We cannot say that it was wrong in itself for her to do so – the realities of the situation made it such that it would be more practical for her to stay behind rather than to pursue a seemingly hopeless life. However, Ruth made the far better choice to follow God's will.

Dear teen, may you continue to seek the Lord even as you strive to dig deeper in His Word, trusting that His Holy Spirit will reveal to you its precious truths.

THOUGHT: Understanding the main point of a narrative helps a lot in interpreting it.

PRAYER: Lord, grant me a clearer understanding of Your Word.

HOW CAN I DIVIDE THIS PASSAGE?

How do you normally study for a History or Biology exam, when there are a lot of facts to remember? Rather than just trying to cram all the facts haphazardly into the brain, most people would find some way of breaking the information down into smaller bits so that it is easier to digest.

Similarly, that’s how it is sometimes with Bible reading. While reading a passage as a whole will give you the gist of it, it is helpful also to divide it into different parts in order to help you focus on different points which the author is trying to make. It is like having paragraphs to organize main thoughts in a book.

In this passage which we have been looking at, an easy and obvious way of dividing it would be to consider the 2 main characters, Ruth and Orpah, separately. As you recall from yesterday’s reading, the main point of the passage is about making godly choices. The actions and response of these 2 women are in stark contrast to each other – Ruth ended up staying true to her word and followed Naomi all the way back to Judah, whereas Orpah eventually changed her mind and chose to remain in her homeland. This provides a nice and neat framework for understanding and interpreting this passage. We can first consider verses 11-13 for the reasons that persuaded Orpah to stay behind amongst her kinsmen. Next, we look to verses 15-17 for the reasons that motivated Ruth to choose to go with Naomi. Sandwiched in between is verse 14, which sums up both their decisions.

From these two sections with contrasting ideas, we can then make the necessary comparisons and delve in more deeply to draw out the lessons and applications which we can apply to our own lives.

As we study the Bible, it would be helpful for us to also try to segment the passages that we study into different parts of paragraphs, in order that we can better understand the main gist and contents it.

THOUGHT: Comparing and contrasting can bring out many lessons!

PRAYER: Lord, grant me the wisdom to rightly discern thy Word.

TUESDAY, JUNE 5

*Ruth 1:5
Memorise 2 Timothy 3:16*

“All scripture is given by inspiration of God...”

WHAT ARE THE INCIDENTAL DETAILS?

Have you ever read a story that related simply the bare facts without any further details? Probably not, for such a story would have been too brief and colourless, not to mention boring, for you to even remember it!

As much as narratives teach spiritual truths, they are also stories that relate certain events and happenings. As such, there are bound to be incidental details here and there which might not add much spiritual value, but that are still helpful in giving colour and adding an additional dimension to the story. For example, verse 5 informs us that both Ruth's as well as Orpah's husband, Mahlon and Chilion, had died. Though there isn't much to say spiritually about this fact, it is still useful in helping us to understand what led up to the events in verses 6-18. Otherwise, it would not make much sense for Ruth and Orpah to even consider going back with Naomi to Judah!

Of course, it is important also not to place too much reliance on these incidental details. Afterall, they are simply that – incidental details – and nothing more. They might help in making the story more understandable, but they should never be twisted out of context to squeeze out some spiritual application that was never there in the first place. For example, it would be absurd to say that this passage teaches us that we should wait for our spouses to die before we can learn how to make godly choices!

Dear teen, may you thus pray for much discernment even as you study God's Word. Learn to separate spiritual truths from other incidental details, and do not confuse the two.

THOUGHT: Knowing which are main ideas and which are details can help a lot in understanding the Bible!

PRAYER: Lord, teach me with the Holy Spirit's help.

WHAT ARE THE KEY WORDS?

Continuing our study of this passage, we look again at the main verse of this whole passage, verse 14.

"And they lifted up their voice, and wept again: and Orpah kissed her mother in law; but Ruth clave unto her."

Reading it closely, you will find that there are two words that sum up so well the opposite responses of the two women. On one end, we have Orpah who "kissed" her mother in law; on the other end, we see Ruth who "clave" unto her. These two key words of the whole passage depict vividly the difference between a good choice and a better choice.

For Orpah, we cannot say that she was entirely wrong in making the choice to stay in her homeland. It is clear from her actions in this verse that she had a deep sense of affection for her mother-in-law and was sorry to have to part with her; hence she kissed her farewell. It was not a mere goodbye wave or a casual handshake; this kiss showed that she did truly care for and love Naomi. However, her love for other things such as her own personal comforts kept her from making the better choice.

On the other hand, although Ruth she displayed no outward sign of affection as Orpah did, the choice that she made reflects even better the state of her heart – it was one that now "clave" unto Naomi. The word "clave" here carries the idea of clinging tightly and following close after, or even to be joined together (as it is used in Gen 2:24 to describe the husband-wife relationship). Ruth was now determined to stick tightly to her mother-in-law – not just in the physical sense of following her all the way home, but more so in the sense of embracing all the Naomi had and believed in, including the God that she believed in and the religion that she practiced.

THOUGHT: To kiss or to cleave?

PRAYER: Lord, grant me a better understanding of the very words of Your Word.

HOW DO I OUTLINE THIS PASSAGE?

Having an outline can be very useful in studying the Bible. Coming up with an outline means that we must first have a good understanding of the main points of the passage and an idea of how the thoughts flow in the passage. An outline also provides a good overview of the main ideas of a passage, so that a reader can know at a glance what the main points are.

After the introduction (vss 1-5), the passage can be split into three main portions. Verses 6-7 give us Naomi’s decision to return home. Verses 8-18 then give us Orpah’s and Ruth’s responses to Naomi’s decision – Orpah’s reasons for remaining “home” in Moab are found in verses 8-13, while verses 14-18 give us Ruth’s resolve for returning “home” to Israel:

1. Naomi’s decision (6-7)
2. Orpah’s response: stay (8-13)
3. Ruth’s response: go (14-18)

The next step would then be to rephrase these main points so that they are in line with the main point of the passage. If you recall, it is about making godly choices that are not just good choices but the best choice. So the outline could be something like this:

1. A choice to make (6-7)
2. A good choice: material blessings (8-13)
3. The best choice: spiritual blessings (14-18)

Having such an outline would help us have the right frame of mind as we read through and study this passage, for it would not only easily segment the thoughts, but it would also guide us in finding the applications and lessons that we can draw from it. With the right amount of effort, patience and prayer, we would be able to do likewise for any narrative that we read of in the Bible. This enables our study of the Bible to be so much more fruitful and enjoyable.

THOUGHT: There is logic and sequence to every passage in the Bible.

PRAYER: Lord, thank You for Your Word which is so clear!

WHAT IS THE APPLICATION OF THIS PASSAGE?

Now that we have a better understanding of what this passage is about after studying it in greater depth over the past few days, it is now time to consider how it can apply to us personally.

Decision-making for a Christian can sometimes be very easy, when the choices make it very clear-cut. For example, you know that, if we are invited by a friend to go clubbing, we know that under no circumstances should we accept the invitation. If we forget to study for a test and the opportunity presents itself to copy a friend's answers, we should never succumb to this temptation. In these instances, we know clearly that we must never make the choice that would lead us to sin. But the problem comes when it seems that neither choice is in itself wrong. This was the situation that Orpah found herself in. The arguments raised by Naomi to dissuade her daughters-in-law from following her were valid – it was impossible for her to provide them with new husbands to marry, nor was it likely that they would be able to enjoy a good and comfortable life if they were to stay with her. Hence, Orpah made the logical choice to bid her mother-in-law goodbye and to remain in her homeland.

However, was this the best choice? Perhaps it was, in the world's eyes, but not so in God's eyes. By remaining in Moab, Orpah was also making the choice to return to her false gods (vs 15), rather than to seek after the God of Israel like Ruth had done. A seemingly okay decision turns out to be not that okay after all, when we consider the spiritual implications of it.

Often, this is the choice that faces us too. Sleep an additional half an hour so you can get more rest, or wake up earlier to do your quiet time? Spend the weekend resting and relaxing after a tough week at school, or spend the time serving God and participating in fellowship activities? Remember, dear teen, that it is not just about not doing things that are outrightly wrong for a Christian; rather, we should also be actively pursuing the things that are best for us spiritually. May you indeed be “steadfastly minded” like Ruth, to pursue only the things of God.

THOUGHT: Obedience is more than just not doing the things we shouldn't; it is also about doing the things we should.

PRAYER: Lord, help me to be a doer of Your Word, and not a hearer only.

SATURDAY, JUNE 9

*Ruth 1:12-13
Memorise Titus 2:12*

"...denying ungodliness and worldly lusts"

IS MY COMMITMENT WORLDLY LIKE ORPAH?

All too often, we see people coming to church for the wrong reasons. Even among the teens, there are sadly some who have the wrong motives for coming to church. Some come to find friends or a boyfriend or girlfriend; others come only to have fun and to enjoy the many activities. When these reasons are taken away, therefore, they are no longer interested in attending. For example, if they find that there are other activities out there in the world that are more fun, they would choose to attend those instead.

How about you, dear teen? Why do you come to church? The character of Orpah which we have been learning about is very much similar to these people whom I have just described. She was willing to follow Naomi for as long as her own personal agenda was being satisfied. However, when it came to crunch time where she had to choose, she ended up choosing the path that would satisfy her own desires. Naomi's arguments made sense – it was not possible for her to find another husband and to give birth to more sons for her daughters-in-law to marry. Even if (and it's a very big IF!) she could, it would be absurd for Ruth and Orpah to wait for them to grow up so that they could marry them. Hence, Orpah took Naomi's advice and chose not to follow her back. Her worldly desire (to find another husband to marry) outweighed any desire for spiritual things. She took the path that would help her to satisfy her worldly and physical desires, rather than the path that would lead to spiritual blessings and a knowledge of God.

Are you an Orpah too? Do you find yourself seeking after worldly blessings, at the expense of your own spiritual walk with God? Have you sacrificed your testimony for the sake of some other worldly pursuit? Dear teen, may you take this chance to reflect on your life today and consider whether you have truly been seeking after God, or whether your commitment has been worldly instead.

THOUGHT: Is my commitment worldly or godly?

PRAYER: Lord, forgive me for the times when I have been an Orpah.

AM I SPIRITUALLY COMMITTED LIKE RUTH?

While there are those who have the wrong motives for attending church, it is also extremely heartening to see teens who are wholly committed to God. Especially during the teenage years when peer pressure is so prevalent, it is so good to know of teens who refuse to bow to the pressure to conform to the world, even if it means that they are teased and mocked by those around them.

Ruth is one such person who refused to abandon her spiritual convictions. Though Naomi persuaded her repeatedly to stay in Moab, Ruth's mind was all made up. Even though Orpah had changed her mind and decided to stay, Ruth would not be swayed. The extent of her commitment was nothing short of amazing.

Firstly, she was willing to follow Naomi anywhere, and to stay wherever she stayed. Though this meant that she would no longer be near her own family, she was willing to do it.

Secondly, her commitment was in terms of her heart and spirit. By saying to Naomi that "thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God", she was effectively renouncing her own race and religion in favour of Naomi's. Truly, how wonderful it is to read of a Gentile girl coming to put her faith and trust in the LORD Jehovah!

Thirdly, her commitment was permanent, not temporary. She was willing to follow Naomi all the way to the grave – to die where she died, and to be buried where she would be buried. This was no spur-of-the-moment decision, but one that she was absolutely convicted of, and one that would not be changed no matter what. This is why she was able to back her resolution up with a solemn oath in the LORD's name.

Dear teen, do you have such a resolve as Ruth did? Are you serious in your commitment to God? Or can it be easily shaken by worldly influences or peer pressure? May you resolve in your heart today to be fully committed to God.

THOUGHT: Ruth was fully committed to spiritual things –am I?

PRAYER: Lord, grant me the grace to be fully committed to You!

HOW DO WE INTERPRET EPISTLES?

Epistles are letters written by the apostles during the New Testament time to specific churches and believers to address certain issues or problems they faced. They are not historical accounts like Genesis or the Gospels but instead contain doctrinal teachings by the apostles as they write about the problems faced by different churches. The structure of an epistle is like a letter with the writer identifying himself and greeting the recipients, followed by the main body of the letter and finally the blessing and farewell. The titles and the beginning of the epistles usually reveal who the writer or the recipient is. It is important to identify who the writer and the recipient(s) are and interpret the epistle in the context of that particular church and the problems it was facing. This would involve researching more into the church and the culture it was in, such as understanding the sinful environment the church of Corinth was in. Also, as the apostles do not always explain the details of the problems the church is facing, it is important to read the whole epistle through and piece together what the problem is. You may need a Bible survey, atlas or encyclopedia to help you for this.

You may wonder how reading about the problems historical churches faced may help you. You will come to realize that a lot of problems faced by the NT churches and believers are problems encountered by believers of all generations. The doctrinal truths taught by the apostles in their epistles stand true now as guidelines for our Christian walk just as they did centuries ago. The epistles are a treasure cove of God’s truths where we can draw rich applications for our daily lives.

Application – In summary, it is important to think through these questions as you interpret an epistle: who is writing the letter and to whom? Why is he writing the letter and what issues does he address in this letter? What is the historical context of the church and where it is located? What are the themes and doctrinal truths that the writer elaborates on? What applications can you draw for your own Christian walk? Finally, as always, before you delve into any interpretation of the Bible, it is crucial to pray for the Holy Spirit’s guidance and illumination.

THOUGHT: Can you name some problems faced by NT churches that we also face now?

PRAYER: Lord, may Thy Spirit guide me as I study the epistles.

WHO IS THE WRITER OF JUDE?

Often when studying an epistle, we can identify the writer of the epistle by its opening address. However, in some epistles such as Hebrews the writer does not identify himself so clearly. In the epistle of Jude, the writer states his identity at its opening. He describes himself as “Jude, the servant of Jesus Christ, and brother of James”.

Jude, or Judas, was one of the apostles of Jesus Christ as mentioned in Luke 6:13-16. He was also called Lebbabaeus and Thaddaeus as in Matthew 10:3. He must be distinguished from his evil namesake, Judas Iscariot, the other apostle who betrayed Jesus. He instead was faithful to his Lord and his calling as an Apostle. He states that he is the brother of James as also mentioned in Luke 6:15-16 and both are the sons of Alphaeus. His brother was also an apostle and a writer of an epistle. By mentioning his brother, he makes it easy for others to recognize him as an Apostle as the two brothers were known together as Apostles of Christ.

Jude describes himself as “the servant of Jesus Christ”. The Greek word for “servant” is “doulos” which means a “slave” or a “bondman”. Although an Apostle, he did not see himself as a high and mighty religious leader like what the Pharisees did but instead, called himself a slave of his master, the Lord Jesus Christ. Instead of seeking self-glorification, he humbly acknowledged he was but a mere servant and gave the glory to Christ. He knew that because of what Jesus did on the cross for him, he was eternally bonded to Him and his Master’s work. This self-proclaimed title of “servant of Jesus Christ” not only shows his humility and understanding of his position before Christ but also his focus on working for Christ.

Application – We may not be Apostles but all of us are servants of Christ. We are indebted to our Master for His death on the cross for us. Let us be faithful to Him like Jude and not betray Him like the other Judas. As faithful servants, we must do His work here on earth by propagating the Gospel and bearing a good testimony for Him until we are called home to Him.

THOUGHT: Do you see yourself as a servant of Jesus Christ? What does it mean to be a servant of Christ?

PRAYER: Lord, grant me humility and strength to be Thy good servant.

“...them that are sanctified by God the Father, and preserved in Jesus Christ, and called...”

WHO WERE THE RECIPIENTS OF JUDE?

The epistle of Jude is not addressed to any particular church, unlike Romans which is written to the church of Rome or 1 and 2 Corinthians addressed to the church in Corinth. It is considered general or catholic, meaning it pertains to the whole Christian body or Church. Jude addresses it to “them that are sanctified by God the Father, and preserved in Jesus Christ, and called”. It was thus written for all believers of Christ and could have been distributed to all the NT churches at that time. Jude was addressing issues that he felt all churches would encounter and needed to be warned about.

Jude describes believers as those who have been sanctified by God the Father. Sanctification means “to be set apart” from the rest of the world as God’s holy people. They are to be set apart from the world as described in 2 Corinthians 6:17-18, “Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, And will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty.”

Believers are also called, and preserved in Jesus Christ. They are called, in that they cannot come on their own accord but only because the Spirit of God first draws them. They are called out from the rest of the world to be God’s people as predestined from before the beginning of the world (Romans 8:30). Having called them, God preserves them in the faith “unto his heavenly kingdom” (2 Timothy 4:18).

Application – If you notice, calling, preservation and sanctification do not involve any active action by the believer. They are all done by God. Truly, our salvation is a work of grace in which we cannot boast to have earned any little part of it. This should bring us to our knees in humility and gratitude to God for His work in our lives. It should also cause us to look to God for help in our spiritual walk as He has promised that He will preserve us. It is still called a “walk” as we are to “make [our] calling and election sure” (2 Pe 1:10), not to take our salvation for granted but to grow in faith and knowledge of God’s Word, yet all the while leaning on Him to help and guide us.

THOUGHT: What does it mean to be called?

PRAYER: Lord, thank You for calling, preserving and sanctifying me.

“...earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints...”

WHAT WAS THE PURPOSE OF JUDE?

The epistle of Jude reads like a warning letter to the Church, both to the New Testament Church and even more so to the Church today. He calls his readers “beloved”, showing the love he has for his fellow believers as well as the love that all believers should have for one another. This love comes from “the common salvation” which we have in Jesus Christ.

He writes that initially, he thought to write about this common salvation that we all share, perhaps to encourage the believers to remain strong in the faith. However, the Spirit moved him to consider a more urgent problem that had to be addressed, and that is the proliferation of false prophets and teachers within the churches, and the need for believers to be warned. This was the more pressing issue, and that became the focus of his letter.

Thus Jude’s purpose of writing his epistle was to call on all true believers of Christ to “earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints”. This was vital as there were false teachers infiltrating the Church which Jude would go on to elaborate on. These false teachers are wolves in sheep’s clothing (Matthew 7:15) and if the Church is not vigilant, she would not even be aware of their presence. In order to be able to spot these false teachers, Jude tells the believers that they need to earnestly contend for the faith. The Greek phrase literally means to “struggle for” and defend the faith. It gives the impression of battling for and protecting the truths of the gospel and the Word of God. This comprises of all aspects of the faith, from the origin of sin in Adam and Eve and its imputation to all man, to the virgin birth of Christ, to Christ’s death and resurrection. This faith was “once delivered”, meaning it was given once and for all to all believers. We are to safeguard, teach, remind and defend all aspects of the faith if it is questioned. By doing so, we can guard ourselves against those who attack and cast doubt on the God’s Word.

Application – Contending for the faith is an active ongoing process, and the duty of every Christian. We have to know God’s Word well and constantly be on our guard against anyone, even church teachers and leaders, if they say something that goes against the truth of God’s Word. We need to help one another as well, just as how Jude did through writing this epistle.

THOUGHT: What are some practical ways that can help you earnestly contend for the faith?

PRAYER: Lord, grant me strength and diligence to contend for the faith which Christ’s precious blood gave to us.

WHAT WERE THE PROBLEMS FACED?

Jude goes on to explain why the believers need to contend for the faith. Jude 4 says, “For there are certain men crept in unawares, who were before of old ordained to this condemnation, ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ.” The danger is very real and near. These men had “crept in” to the church. They are enemies of God within God’s own barracks! They could be our friends, relatives, contact group members, ministry co-workers, elders or even pastors. Seeing that they could be anyone in the church, believers would do well to first examine themselves to ensure that they did not have the characteristics of these “ungodly men”.

The characteristics of these men were that they turned “the grace of our God into lasciviousness”. Instead of leading holy lives according to God’s will, they abused God’s grace and used the excuse that “grace may abound” (Rom 6:1), to sin even more. “Lasciviousness” means filthiness, wantonness and lustfulness. They promote sins such as homosexuality and fornication, ignoring what the Bible says about how God hates such sin. They deny “the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ”. They probably bear the pretence that they believe in God but deny that He is the only true God. Likewise, they deny that Jesus is the only way to salvation and believe that other religions also can save. They promote ecumenism and believe in uniting with other religions. In this, they have denied Jesus’ work on the cross and cannot be called Christians.

Thus they are corrupt in both their morals and their doctrines, are a great threat to the purity and sanctify of any church.

Application – Imagine what these “ungodly men” can do in a church. Slowly, they would promote their beliefs and cast doubt on what the Bible says. If they are leaders or in teaching positions, the damage they can do is even more, especially if they are teaching the younger children or teenagers. Therefore, we need to always be on the alert. Let us be like the Bereans who “received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so” (Acts 17:11). Let us also examine our hearts to make sure we do not have the heart of such “ungodly men”.

THOUGHT: How should you equip yourself to guard against false teachers?

PRAYER: Lord, grant me discernment to identify false teachers

"...wandering stars, to whom is reserved the blackness of darkness forever..."

HOW DID JUDE DEVELOP HIS ARGUMENTS?

Jude goes on to elaborate on these "ungodly men" by using vivid analogies and examples from the Bible which believers will identify with. He also goes on to show how these men will be judged by God. In verse 5-6, he likens them to the Israelites who were killed because of their unbelief that God could bring them into the promised land, and to the fallen angels who will be judged at the end. These two groups started off seemingly following God when in actual fact, they were never on God's side. These "ungodly men" were also self-proclaimed Christians but their hearts revealed otherwise. They promoted sins like homosexuality and fornication and will be punished as Sodom and Gomorrah were.

They also had no respect for church authority which is given by God alone and would "despise" and "speak evil" of them (v.8). This is in contrast to Michael the archangel who dared not even accuse the devil when they disputed about the body of Moses but left the judgment to God (v.9). These "ungodly men" accuse God's servants out of ignorance and stupidity and as a result, end up corrupting themselves (v.10).

They despise the true believers of God like Cain hated and murdered Abel (Genesis 4:5). They covet money and riches above speaking God's truth like Balaam (Numbers 22:7). They cause strife and rebel against authority like how Korah and his company, also known as Core, did against Moses and Aaron (Numbers 16:1). They speak great swelling words but have no substance or fruit useful to God. Jude likens them to "clouds without water", "trees whose fruit withereth", "raging waves of the sea, foaming out their own shame" and "wandering stars, to whom is reserved the blackness of darkness forever". They are "murmurers, complainers, walking after their own lusts" and desiring the praise of men rather than God's. The descriptive analogies cited by Jude highlight God's hatred of these men and their impending judgment.

Application – Jude mentions Enoch and his prophecy of Christ coming again with "ten thousands of his saints" to convict these men of their sins and judge them. We are even nearer to the end times than Enoch and Jude. How much more we need to contend for the faith!

THOUGHT: Read through the OT accounts of Cain, Balaam and Korah. Compare them with the "ungodly men" in Jude.

PRAYER: Lord, protect thy church from these ungodly men. Help us to identify and speak against them.

WHAT WERE THE APPLICATIONS THAT JUDE MADE?

After reading Jude's stern warnings against these ungodly men, it is easy to feel disheartened and afraid. However, Jude goes on to encourage the beloved saints in Christ. His loving words to them are a striking contrast to the harsh words to God's enemies. He exhorts them to persevere in Christ. He calls on them to remember the words of the Apostles and not follow these ungodly men who have "not the Spirit", meaning that they are not saved at all but yet in the church. He encourages them to build up themselves in the faith, pray in the Holy Spirit, keep themselves in the love of God and look to Jesus and His mercy. These are all action verbs that require effort on the part of the believers. They are to actively grow in Christ by reading and hearing His Word, seek Him through prayer, remember Him and look to Him always in all things.

Jude then instructs the believers how to deal with their brethren who have erred in their doctrine. He recognizes that some may have been led astray by charismatic leaders because of their weak faith or ignorance. These he says to have "compassion" on and teach them the truth and correct their errors. Even those who knowingly defy the Word of God are not entirely doomed yet. Jude says that these can be saved "with fear", "pulling [them] out of the fire" just in time, by exposing their error and rebuking them. Believers have a part to play in helping one another as we walk the narrow way together. It is our duty to correct in love if another steps out of the right way.

Application – It is not enough to just say the sinner's prayer and attend church service on Sundays to grow as a child of God. Yes, by hearing the Word of God being preached during service, you may grow a little by God's grace but what happens if false doctrines are being preached? You will be easily led astray. There needs to be effort on your part to read God's Word and seek Him in prayer so that His Holy Spirit can sanctify you and build you up in the faith through His Word.

THOUGHT: What should you do as a teen if your teacher teaches something which you know is against the Word of God?

PRAYER: Help me Lord, to keep a close walk with Thee so that I will not be susceptible to wrong doctrines and that I will be vigilant of false teachers.

MONDAY, JUNE 18

Jude 1-25
Memorise Jude 24-25

"...now onto Him that is able to keep you from falling and to present you faultless..."

WHAT ARE SOME THEMES OF THE BOOK OF JUDE?

While studying an epistle, it is good to take a broad overview as well and identify general themes expressed in it. In Jude, a major theme that covers most of the epistle is that of false teachers. Jude spends a large section of the epistle describing them and the judgment awaiting them. This is a very important theme that applies very much to the church of today as we draw closer and closer to Christ's second coming. In this age of ecumenism and neo-evangelicalism, many will compromise on God's truth for material gain, acceptance, pride, and for self-indulgent sins. As you can see from Jude's OT examples, such men have existed from the beginning of the world and throughout the history of the church. There will always be enemies of God in our midst and we must guard against them.

This leads us to the next theme of Jude which is the Christian as a soldier. This has been touched on in many other epistles as well. Christians are portrayed as soldiers who need to fight against false teachings and guard against anything that defies God's Truth. To do this well, the Christian needs to build up his armour. Jude describes this in verses 17-23.

Another theme of Jude is how the enemies of God will eventually have to face the judgment of God. The fallen angels are "reserved in everlasting chains" for the final judgment. The false teachers will be judged when Christ comes again (v.15). Michael the archangel knew that the devil would be judged by God and so did not bring his own judgment on him. We should follow Michael's example and not seek our own vengeance when we know that God will eventually judge our enemies.

Application – Jude ends with a beautiful benediction which is often used to end church services. It also speaks of another theme in Jude. How God will preserve His children from sin and false doctrine up till we stand before Him in His glory. You may think that we have many faults yet Christ's redeeming blood is able to present us faultless before Him at the end. Therefore, do not lose heart and cling onto Jesus. He alone has the power to carry you through this life.

THOUGHT: Can you come up with any other themes in Jude?

PRAYER: Lord, help me as I study Thy Word. Help me to understand it and to grow from meditating on it.

*“. . . to the only wise God our Saviour, be glory and majesty, Dominion and power,
both now and ever. Amen...”*

HOW CAN WE OUTLINE THE BOOK OF JUDE?

In studying an epistle, it is a good practice to read through the whole epistle and come up with an outline for it before delving deeper into its contents. The artificial divisions into chapters that we have in our Bibles were not there in the actual letters and so may not represent the best divisions when we consider the context. Therefore, we should form our own headings for each section of the epistle to help us analyse it better.

Jude is a short epistle and thus, is a good example to start with. It can be outlined as such:

1. Salutation and greetings (v.1-2)
2. Purpose of writing the epistle (v.3)
3. Warning of false teachers within the church (v.4)
4. Description of these false teachers and how they will be judged (v.5-16)
5. Exhortation and encouragement to the believers (v.17-23)
6. Benediction (v.24-25)

Application – By breaking an epistle into sections, it makes it easier and more manageable to study. You can then study each section in detail and see how the writer expands on his main point. When studying the Bible, try to meditate on the words and understand the passage for yourself before turning to commentaries. You always learn more by thinking deeply into a passage, rather than taking the easy way out and reading a commentary. Of course, there is nothing wrong with referring to a good trustworthy commentary but only to double check your own understanding or if you need help with verses that are more difficult to comprehend. Also remember, that all commentaries, no matter how trustworthy, were written by man, and can be fallible. Only God’s Word is perfect and always true. By knowing God’s Word for ourselves, we can better contend for the faith as Jude has encouraged us to earnestly do.

THOUGHT: How would you outline the book of Jude for yourself?

PRAYER: Dear Lord, grant me due diligence and guidance from Thy Spirit to “study to shew [myself] approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth” (2 Tim 2:15).

HOW DO WE INTERPRET PROPHECY?

Prophecy is a very important part of scripture. By one count, there are 48 prophets and 7 prophetesses in the Bible and about one third of the Bible consists of prophecies. That is a lot. Hence it will do us well to learn how to interpret prophecy correctly. The principles of interpretation are similar as compared to other forms of scripture. We will apply these principles to the book of Obadiah.

1. Firstly, pray for Holy Spirit illumination. We are often too eager and rush into the task at hand forgetting to pray. This however, is most important which we cannot neglect. God’s Word needs God’s illumination and unless He enlightens us, man can never understand His holy Word.
2. The next thing is to understand the context. What was the prophecy for and for whom and pronounced by who? This still is particularly important in the understanding of prophecy, for if we do not know who the prophecy for and why it was given, many things will be vague and confusing to us. This helps us understand better the reason behind why various things are said and the manner in which it has been said.
3. One should read the book at least several times, checking up any difficult words and trying to understand the main gist of book. After that create an outline of the book. An outline consists of a breakdown of the book into multi-level parts. This exercise forces one to understand the book better in the process of creating the outline.
4. Look for parallel passages that relate to the passage at hand. This can be found using some Bible helps like the ‘Treasury of Scripture Knowledge’. God has provided parallel passages to help us understand Scripture better. Hence we should seek them out.
5. Finally, derive the learning lessons that can be applied to your life. All Scripture contains application, lessons that we should learn for our lives. It is up to us to search them out for our learning, by the grace of God.

We will endeavour to apply these principles to the book of Obadiah in the coming readings. May God help us and give us the grace to interpret His Word correctly for our edification.

THOUGHT: How is studying God’s Word different from studying school work?

PRAYER: Father, help me, a weak and foolish student of your Word.

WHAT IS THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF OBADIAH?

Understanding the historical context in which a book of the Bible was written helps us to appreciate the lives of characters and circumstances in which they lived in and therefore enabling us to understand more accurately about what is written. However, sometimes it is not possible to be very precise about the historical context of a book because there is little information provided from God’s Word. However, we can still try to make some conclusions while at the same time bearing in mind not to be too hard-and-fast about the accuracy of our conclusions.

Obadiah is such a book where very little is known about who Obadiah is or what period the book was written or which period the prophesy referred to. Most Bible scholars believe that Obadiah’s prophesies referred to the period after Jerusalem was conquered by Nebuchadnezzar in 588 B.C. History also tells us that Edom was eventually conquered by Nebuchadnezzar within 5 years from that time which matches the Obadiah’s prophesy where Edom would eventually be conquered by a heathen nation. (v1-7). Based on verses 11 to 14, we can also conclude that the book may have been written after the conquest of Jerusalem as the evil deeds on Judah listed appear to have already been committed. Hence, Obadiah may have been written the book while he himself was in captivity. With this understanding of the context, it is possible that the book of Obadiah was then written for the Jews languishing in captivity and it was meant for their encouragement. Knowing that their God has not forsaken them, but will vindicate them against their enemies. and will deliver them eventually can be a great source of hope and comfort in times of suffering. God is very merciful that despite the fact that the Jews deserved their punishment for their hideous trespasses, God continued to give the Jews the promise and hope of deliverance. For us, it speaks about the merciful and loving character of God and that we can take comfort that He will never forsake us either.

THOUGHT: Did the knowledge of the historical context of the book make a difference in your understanding?

PRAYER: Lord, help me to be diligent and to search out all I need to know concerning your precious Word.

WHO WERE THE EDMITES?

There are some facts in the Bible that are not found simply in one book but in several. By reading Gen 36, we can understand more about the Edomites. Edomites are the descendants of Esau and we know from earlier records in Genesis that he was the son of Issac and the twin brother of Jacob. (Gen 25:24-26). We also know how Esau lost his birthright to Jacob through unfair means. Hence, Esau hated Jacob. The hatred the Edomites have for the Israelites may have originated from this same hatred. In Gen 36:2, we read that Esau took wives of the Canaanites which were neighbors of the Israelites which also helps us understand why the Edomites occasionally became a part of the history of Israel because they were geographically near. Reading the long list of the descendants of Esau, we know that they have become a sizable nation. This fulfills the promise made to Abraham by God that he will be the father of many nations. (Gen 17:4). In addition, this is also a fulfillment of the prophecy given to Rebekah when the Lord said in Gen 25:23 that there were two nations in her womb. We also know that Edom though a weaker nation than Israel still posed a threat as history later records how Edom join forces with the Assyrians to partake in the destruction of Israel. Gen 36:8 tells us that Esau dwelt in mount Seir which concurs with Obadiah v3 where we are told that the Edomites took pride in living in high places. Gen 36 helps us understand the Edomites better. Understanding their origins as descendants of Esau helps us understand why the Edomites hate the Israelites so much. Furthermore, we see that God in His mercies did prosper them. They were not neglected and grew as a nation by God's blessings. Hence God's judgment against them was justified because despite God's goodness, they continued to commit heinous sins against Him and His chosen people.

Interpreting Obadiah better and correctly involves understanding the Edomites better and this is best done by referring to other parts of scripture where the Edomites are mentioned. Reading Gen 36 helps breathe life into our understanding as it adds other dimensions to the Edomites.

THOUGHT: The only nation that God promised He will preserve is Israel.

PRAYER: Lord, help me find the appropriate passages of scripture that will tell me more about the Edomites.

WHAT WERE THE EDMITES LIKE?

We can know more about the Edomites by referring to within Obadiah itself. Verses 2 to 4 give us more clues to what they were like. We read that the Edomites were small compared to the other heathen nations. This is true in history. The other neighboring heathen nations were the Assyrians, Chaldeans, Egyptians, Syrians and the Arabs - all big and mighty nations, some of which still exist to this day. Compared to these other nations, the Edomites were a small insignificant people. Verse 2 also tell us that not only were they small in comparison, they were also greatly despised among the heathens. This made them vulnerable to attack because of the hatred other nations had for them, which was prophesied to happen in verses 15-19. Verses 3 and 4 tell us that the Edomites dwelled in the clefts of the rocks. Historians have found such dwelling places which consisted of cave-like dwellings that were carved out of the rock located on mountains and high places. Such dwelling places provided natural defense for the Edomites. Not only where they protected by the surrounding rock, they were also located on a high place. In ancient warfare, it was difficult and required more effort to attack a place that was located higher up while it is easier for those on a higher plane to ward off attackers that were ascending upwards towards them. Hence, in v3 we read that the Edomites took pride in being located on such an easily defendable fortress. They believed that no one could bring them down. But God declared that this was false pride because there was no preventing God's judgment. It did not matter how formidable their cities or high walls were, or how powerful their armies were. To God, these are all nothing compared to His great power.

We learn here that the Edomites were a proud people who believed that their dwelling place was secure from any attack. They thought that they could sin against God and not fear judgment because their defenses were impregnable. But, we know from history that this was not true because eventually they too were conquered and destroyed, never to be heard from again.

THOUGHT: We can only trust God, the best defenses are useless without His protection.

PRAYER: Father, with this understanding of the Edomites, open your Word further unto me.

WHAT IS THE GENERAL GIST OF OBADIAH?

After understanding the background and context of a biblical book, the next thing to do is to get a general idea of what the book is about. This can be achieved by reading it several times from beginning to end. One should try to read as many times as possible. You will find new discoveries each time and with each repeated reading, you will have a stronger grasp of what the book is about. It is good if a complete reading can be done at one sitting. This helps you remember parts of the book so that you can relate the ideas together and understand the book better.

Obadiah can be summarized as God's judgment on those who harm His chosen people. This can be derived from your reading by observing that there exist certain broad overarching ideas in the book of Obadiah. Firstly, you will notice the naming of the sins of Edom in how they pride themselves in the carnal protection of the mountains. God hates pride. (Prov 8:13). Furthermore, they participated in the cruel destruction of Jerusalem as allies to the Babylonians. Their cruelty and cowardly attacks on Judah were condemned. Finally, their judgment was pronounced. Their evil deeds shall be returned to them. They will be inflicted with the same acts of cruelty that they themselves inflicted on the Israelites. Not only will Zion be finally restored, the same people that they seek to destroy will be the source of their own destruction. In the twist of events, Israel will be called to destroy Edom.

Having a broad idea of a book helps us in our next step of study where we seek to understand the details of smaller passages of the book. Without the broader understanding of a book, interpreting smaller passages of scripture may result in error. This is because we lose sight of what is the main or broader thrust or idea of what the author intends. Hence the importance of first developing this broader idea prior to going into the details. May God help us understand His Word more thoroughly.

THOUGHT: How many times do you think you should reread a book before you are ready to study the details?

PRAYER: Father, give me the patience to study Your Word.

WHAT PARALLEL PASSAGES CAN WE TURN TO?

The best commentary of Scripture is Scripture itself. If there is another passage in Scripture that adds more insight to the one that we are looking at at the moment, it helps us see another perspective and therefore improves our understanding. Our reference today in Ps 137 is told from the perspective of the Jewish captives, those who survived the massacre and were brought over to the land of Babylon as prisoners. It reads of the great sadness they felt, not just because they were prisoners but of the memory of how Zion fell, how their beloved home was lost and destroyed. They witnessed great atrocities done, including their beloved young ones being dashed to death against stones. (v9). The Psalm relates how they wept by the rivers of Babylon and how they could not sing anymore because of the great sadness that they felt. (vv1-3). It also describes how they now felt the preciousness of Jerusalem, the land that was given to them by God. There were two enemy nations named in this Psalm: Edom and Babylon. The mention of Babylon is to be expected because it was the main perpetrator used by God to destroy Judah. It was a mighty conquering nation that was expanding its borders and Jerusalem was merely among the many others in its path of conquest. However for Edom to be named, it is very significant because Edom was not a big nation. They stood out in the mind of the Psalmist because their betrayal and cruelty was so deep. The Psalmist through the inspiration of God named Edom along with Babylon for judgment. Hence, we come to understand the significant role Edom played in the destruction of Israel and how they deserve the eventual judgment that will come. Therefore as we read this Psalm, further light is shed upon the reason why Edom deserved such rebuke and judgment as described in the book of Obadiah.

As a side lesson, we learn the lesson of sin and its consequences. Israel was destroyed according to the judgment will of God because of how they grievously sinned against God. Although their punishment was severe, it was justly deserved because their sin was just as severe. We are reminded of any sin in our lives and to fear God as one who can and will judge if sin goes unrepented. Scripture teaches us to fear the Lord. Although He is tender loving towards us, we must not forget His attribute as the holy Judge of all ages. May we also tremble before Him and strive to be holy.

THOUGHT: Is it possible to find another part of scripture that speaks of a similar thing for every verse of the Bible?

PRAYER: Father, may I learn the value of understanding your word through seeking out cross-references.

HOW CAN WE OUTLINE THE BOOK OF OBADIAH?

Reducing a book into an outline is important because it allows us to have, in a way, a more simplified view of the book. In so doing, we are able to understand the book easier because we can now relate parts of it to other parts more clearly. Without an outline, we may not be able to understand how the part we are reading fits into the rest of the book thus missing the meaning intended by the author. The process of reducing Obadiah into an outline can be done first of all by reading it through several times. After which, try to identify the common meaning or purpose within adjacent verses. Group these related verses into sections. Each of these sections can be given a title that forms the first level of the outline. Within each section, read the verses more closely and see if they can be further broken down to form sub-sections. Continue this process until you have completed breaking down the entire book.

Obadiah can be reduced into the following outline:

1. Judgment of Edom is declared. (v1-2)
2. Pride of the Edomites (v3-9)
3. Sins of the Edmoites (v10-14)
4. Judgment on the Edomites (v15-16)
5. Restoration of Zion (v17-21)

By studying the outline, we can see how the Holy Spirit organizes the book. The book is written to comfort the Israelites who were in exile. The book starts off with comfort by the declaring that their enemy the Edomites will be judged. Further comfort can be derived from the naming of the sins of Edom showing that God was not blind to their sins and names them one by one. The book ends with promise of restoration and how Israel will be given a part in the destruction of their enemy. Truly, we are reminded of Lam 3:32. We have a merciful God who will never give up on us.

THOUGHT: God’s Word always has an order and a logical sequence. Every chapter, every verse, every word, was written exactly as how God intended it to be.

PRAYER: Father give me the grace, wisdom and diligence to be able to outline passages correctly.

WHAT IMPACT WOULD THE MESSAGE OF OBADIAH HAVE FOR EDMOM?

The prophesy of Obadiah was targeted at the Edomites. (v1). Although the final fate of Israel is also spoken of for their encouragement, the purpose was also for the Edomites to know the judgment that will be laid upon them shortly. Hence, we can say that one of the audiences of the book are the Edomites. Knowing this, we then ask ourselves what is the message that is meant for them. At the very start we read a sobering declaration that the heathen have been moved by God to prepare to attack Edom. If the Edomites believe in this prophesy they should be shaking in fear at this point. Obadiah continues to shatter each of the things they trust the most. Their trust in their elevated habitation which will offer no protection, their trust in their allies who will turn against them and their trust in the wise and strong men of Edom who will be destroyed. After this, Obadiah lists the heinous sins that they committed against God's chosen people. How they stood as cheering spectators and did not help to defend Judah when they were attacked despite their relationship as brothers. Furthermore when Judah was destroyed they spoke proudly against them. God holds them accountable not just for their actions, but also for the words that they utter. They were also guilty in entering into the land belonging to Israel and stealing their possessions. And perhaps the most cruel of all was how they stood at the way of escaping Jews and killed them as they came. The Jews were most vulnerable and instead of helping them, they struck them down. Finally, God declares again definite judgment upon them. In the same way that they harmed Israel, they will in turn be struck down themselves.

We know from history that Edom did not repent of their sins and were eventually attacked and conquered as predicted by Obadiah. Obadiah's prophesy fell on deaf ears. At the same time, we are encouraged that God will surely avenge His people. We as Christians are His chosen people by adoption. Hence, we know that God will similarly guard us with the same kind of jealousy as He did the Jews. We are the apple of His eye. (Ps 17:8).

THOUGHT: If your sibling were harmed by another, what would you do?

PRAYER: Father, help me to remember how you care and love for me and to always have hope.

THURSDAY, JUNE 28

Obadiah 17-21
Memorise Ephesians 2:4

“...I have loved thee with an everlasting love, ...with lovingkindness have I drawn thee.”

WHAT IMPACT WOULD THE MESSAGE OF OBADIAH HAVE FOR ISRAEL?

The 2nd half of the book of Obadiah relates to the nation of Israel. Although there are still references to the house of Esau which is Edom, most of it tells us more of what will happen to Israel. We have to remember that one of the key purposes for the book is to act as a comfort and encouragement to the people of Israel who by now were in captivity. After declaring a series of judgments on Edom, v17 starts with an exception; “but”. God will judge Edom, but, God will do something for Israel that will be different. There will be deliverance upon Mt Zion. While Edom will be destroyed, Zion will be delivered. Zion will be like the fire, while Edom the stubble and we know how easily stubble burns at the slightest flames. Obadiah continues to declare how the lands of Edom will be completely divided and taken over by foreign forces. V21, the final verse ends with a great word of triumph; mount Zion will be saved by saviours and the kingdom of Edom will finally belong to the Lord.

To understand the impact of this message to the Israelites, one must recall what was learnt so far about the context and background of the book. We remember that those who survived the conquest of Jerusalem and were taken captive, survived with memories of the horrific atrocities they witnessed at the fall of Jerusalem. Their memories would have consisted of the part Edom played as well. This message would have seemed like poetic justice, but there was more to it than just vengeance. The Edomites do indeed deserve their just recompense, but the greater message to the Israelites would be the assurance of God’s deliverance. That God had not been blind to their plight and had not forsaken them. This message would have been a message of comfort. That although God has chastised his children greatly, yet He will be quick to deliver them and return full measure of judgment to those who have harmed them. We can learn a lesson here too. As believers, we are adopted into the family of God and are precious to Him. We too enjoy the great sovereign love and protection that was expressed to the nation of Israel. Take heart if you undergo trial at this time. God will not forsake you.

THOUGHT: Would God avenge us if we were attacked?

PRAYER: Father, help me to trust you more.

FRIDAY, JUNE 29

Obadiah 1-14
Memorise Jeremiah 17:9

*"...out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries,
fornications thefts, false witness, blasphemies."*

WHAT SPIRITUAL LESSONS CAN WE DRAW FROM OBADIAH?

There are many lessons we can draw throughout the book of Obadiah even though it is a short book. The focus of the first part of the book is the listing and condemnation of the sins of Edom. Edom was guilty of pride, of trusting in the things of the world instead of God and of cruelty and betrayal towards Israel their brothers. They were a cowardly bunch. Taking refuge among the Babylonians, they attacked Judah when they were weakest and most vulnerable. Most of us would read vv 1-14 aghast with horror at how anyone could do what they have done. These are sins which most, if not all of us would not imagine doing. However, what we may not realize is that, in reality, many of us have been guilty of these sins in one form or another. The difference lies only in the conditions wherein we live that did not permit us to put these sins into full practice. In other words, it is by the mercies of God that we are constrained by our circumstances to prevent us from becoming just like the Edomites.

How many of us have been free from pride? How many of us have never put our trust in the things of the world and not trusted God? How many of us have hated our brother or sister when we were angry. Although we have not killed anyone with our anger, but we have nonetheless treaded along that same path that leads eventually to it if not for the constraining mercies of God. Perhaps we can say that we would never do what the Edomites have done, but in our hearts, we may be no better. We have been guilty of the same sins. Therefore, when we read the first part of Obadiah, it should cause us to be humble. We should recognize that it is only by the mercies of God that we have not become like the Edomites and suffer the same judgment. But left to our own devices, we would have easily slipped into hideous sins of any kind.

May Obadiah be a warning to each of us to remember that we can be no better if we allow sin to fester unrepented. If it were not for the grace of God that worked in our lives, we would still be wallowing in the filth of our sins!

THOUGHT: Sins start from the heart but eventually become an act if not stopped and repented of.

PRAYER: Father, teach me to recognize how evil my own heart can be and to be humble.

WHAT SPIRITUAL LESSONS CAN WE DRAW FROM OBADIAH?

The 2nd half of the book of Obadiah we see a very different tone set. We read of how God will deliver Zion. We read of how God will thoroughly and completely destroy Edom for the sake of His chosen ones. What the Edomites gained through their cruelty shall be returned onto them for their destruction. The same Zion that they seek to destroy will themselves become their destroyer. Looking at how God has controlled and moved events and kingdoms at His will, we can learn a few things.

As believers too are are God's chosen ones. As saints, we are precious in His sight (Ps 116:15). Anyone who harms His children harms the apple of His eye (Zec 2:8). This fact should encourage and bring us much comfort in times of trial and difficulties. God is powerful and sovereign over all. God is God of both the Heaven and the Earth and has power over everything! No kingdom can prevail against His will. All are at His mercy. He can bring one down and raise another up simply to fulfill His purposes. There is nothing that is too difficult or that works outside His will. Knowing this, we should not fear any difficult circumstance or enemy. "The earth is the LORD'S, and the fulness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein." Psa 24:1. God avenged Israel even though we know that Israel was simply paying for their sins. What they suffered was chastisement for their grievous sins against God. They were given just recompense but yet God was merciful to promise deliverance and give them hope. How much more if we as saints of God suffered simply because we were doing His will or answering His call? Even more so, God will stretch out His hand to preserve those who are His and who are faithful. If you have been faithfully serving and following after the Lord, and suffer because of that, you are most precious in His sight. In His time and according to His will, there will be deliverance. If you are His, but you have persisted in sin and suffer chastisement and the just consequences of sin, know that God is merciful and will be certain to restore you if you will return to Him in repentance. However, if you persist in your sin, you should fear God and know that He is also a righteous judge. Just as He has grievously judged Israel and will judge Edom, He can judge you too. Do not persist in sin.

THOUGHT: "Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling" (Psa 2:11).

PRAYER: Father, help me to trust you and fear you.

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