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How to Study the Bible

Figuring Out the Figurative

An old, old man sat before his twelve sons. His eyes had failed, but his insight had not. Knowing that his time was drawing near, he wished to pronounce his vision of each man's future. They stood waiting, respectful in their silence. Finally the ancient one spoke: "Come close, my sons. Listen carefully to what your father tells you."

The gathered successors leaned closer, straining to hear. Robert, the eldest, occupied a central position. It was to him that the wheezing voice spoke first.

"Robert, you were the first, my pride and joy. But you are boiling water. You shall be first no longer."

The younger man's face fell, fighting back shame and rage. But he dared not reply. The old man was continuing without a pause.

"Stephen and Lawrence. You are thieves and murderers. To you I leave no blessing, only a curse.

"John, you are a lion's cub, and so you will rule. But someday you will wash your clothes in wine.

"Zachary is a seaport where ships will find harbor.

p 263 "Ian is nothing but a wild mule. Satisfied with anyone who feeds him, he will spend his days in forced labor.

“Daniel, you are a snake lying in the road. You will strike at your brothers and be their judge.

“George, you are a bandit. You will rob and be robbed, and live in uncertainty.

“Allen loves the choicest of meats. But he will spend his days cooking, not eating.

“Nathan is a deer on the run. His words will leap and dance.

“Jonathan, you are my tree along the cool river bank. You will grow and prosper and shade all your brothers. To you will come the blessings of my fathers, and through you will pass the blessings to my descendants.

“Bradley, my last, is a vicious wolf, hungry and wild. All day you will kill, and all night you will devour.”

He finished abruptly, and no sound could be heard but the droning of flies. No one moved. Each son brooded on the words given to him. They failed to notice that the rattling patriarch, his words at an end, had dropped his head on his chest and sighed his last.

A Way of Speaking

What are we to make of this biblical tale? Oh, did I forget to tell you? This is a loose reconstruction of Genesis 49, where Jacob summons his twelve sons and prophesies the future of each one's lineage.

If you read the account, you'll notice the odd descriptions assigned to several of them: Judah is called a “lion's whelp” (v. 9); Zebulun is a “haven for ships” (v. 13); Issachar is “a strong donkey” (v. 14); Dan is a “serpent in the way, a horned snake in the path” (v. 17); Naphtali is a “doe let loose” (v. 21); Joseph is a “fruitful bough by a spring” (v. 22); and Benjamin is a “ravenous wolf” (v. 27).

Again, what are we to make of these descriptions? We might expect Noah to talk to his sons like this after being cooped up on the ark, but what are these words doing in the mouth of Jacob? Are we to take them literally? If not, why not? How do we know when Scripture is actually representing reality and when it merely describes reality?

p 264 The issue here is figurative language. We're all familiar with figures of speech. We use them all the time: "I could have died of embarrassment." "I guess I'll have to face the music." "So-and-so is as mad as a hornet." "He was bored to tears." "Don't let the cat out of the bag." "She has a green thumb."

The biblical writers and characters were no different. They laced their material with vivid images, and peculiar ways of speaking. David says that the person who follows God's Word will be like a tree, but the wicked are like chaff (Psalm 1:3–4). The bride in Song of Solomon 2:1 says she is "the rose of Sharon, the lily of the valleys." She calls her lover a gazelle or young stag "climbing on the mountains, leaping on the hills" (2:8–9). Jesus called Herod a fox (Luke 13:32), the Pharisees whitewashed tombs (Matthew 23:27), and James and John the Sons of Thunder (Mark 3:17). Paul called certain false teachers dogs (Philippians 3:2).

Of course, the Bible's figurative language can be far more elaborate, even going beyond the spoken word to graphic object lessons. God told Jeremiah to buy a clay pitcher, take it to the leaders, prophesy against them, and then break the pitcher as a picture of what God was going to do to the nation (Jeremiah 19). Hosea was told to marry an adulteress as a symbol of God's faithful love for His people, and their faithlessness toward Him (Hosea 1:2–9; 3:1–5).

When we come to John's Revelation, we run into some very unusual language. A ruler in heaven appears as a jasper stone surrounded by a rainbow (4:3). He sees a lamb with seven horns and seven eyes (5:6). He also sees a beast rising up out of the sea, with ten horns and seven heads (13:1). And at the end of the book, an entire city covering more than two million square miles drops out of heaven (21:16).

These things make for interesting reading. But what do they mean? How are we to interpret them in our Bible study process? How do we know when to read the Bible literally and when to read it figuratively?

I'm going to give you ten principles for figuring out the figurative. But first, let's make sure we understand the difference between "literal" and "figurative." People talk about a "literal interpretation of Scripture." Does that mean that in Genesis 49, they see Judah as a real, live lion's cub? Or Joseph standing by a creek with roots going down into the soil? Or Benjamin as p 265 some sort of uncontrollable werewolf? If so, I've got a good psychiatrist I can recommend.

When we speak of "literal interpretation," we mean taking the language in its normal sense, accepting it at face value as if the writer is communicating in ways that people normally communicate. As one person has put it, "When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense."

So, according to this principle, when Jesus tells us to "render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's" (Luke 20:25), we don't need to look for some hidden meaning or elaborate interpretation. It's quite plain that He is telling us to pay our taxes. On the other hand, when He calls Herod a fox, He obviously is not saying that the man is a roving carnivore. He's speaking figuratively, comparing Herod to that sly, dog-like creature.

Figuring Out the Figurative

What happens when the “plain sense” does not make common sense? Are there any rules that govern when we should interpret odd expressions figuratively and when we should take them literally? I’m afraid there are no foolproof means for that. But here are ten principles that will keep you out of the worst kinds of trouble.

1. Use the literal sense unless there is some good reason not to.

This is clear from what we have just talked about. In reading the Bible, we have to assume that the writers were normal, rational people who communicated in the same basic ways that we do. And yet time and time again, people “spiritualize” the text, trying to make it say everything but what it plainly says.

A classic illustration is the Song of Solomon. For years, interpreters have said that this is an allegory of the relationship between Christ and His church. But how can that possibly fit with the text? The poem was written centuries before Christ. It has a definite lyric form and needs to be read according to the conventions of that genre. Moreover, there’s a simpler, more sensible interpretation: this is a book that celebrates erotic love in marriage as God intended it to be.

2. Use the figurative sense when the passage tells you to do so.

Some passages tell you up front that they involve figurative imagery. For instance, whenever you come across a dream or a vision, you can expect to find symbolic language because that’s the language of dreams. In Genesis 37, it’s clear from the context that Joseph’s dreams are talking about things

that are going to happen in the future. The same is true of the pharaoh's dreams in Genesis 41 and of Daniel's prophetic visions in Daniel 7–12.

3. Use the figurative sense if a literal meaning is impossible or absurd.

This is where we need some sanctified common sense. God does not shroud Himself in unknowable mysticism. When He wants to tell us something, He tells us. He doesn't confound us with nonsense. However, He often uses symbolism to make His points. Yet He expects us to read them as symbols, not absurdities.

Consider Revelation 1:16, where the Lord appears: "Out of His mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword." What does this mean? Is it likely that our Lord would have a literal sword sticking out of His mouth? Hardly. The most likely explanation is a figurative one, so we need to search the text for what this picture represents.

It's probably not what you think. You may be thinking of Hebrews 4:12, which says that the Word of God is "sharper than any two-edged sword." On that basis, you might assume that the Revelation image is about Christ and His Word. But a word study rules otherwise.

The word for "sword" in Revelation 1:16 is not the same as the word used in Hebrews 4:12. In Hebrews, the sword is a short, fighting sword like those used by Roman soldiers. But the sword in Revelation is a large, ceremonial sword of victory and judgment. Carried by a conquering king, it would be used to execute the vanquished after a triumphal procession. Consider how that fits with the theme and imagery of Revelation.

So figurative language can be very descriptive, as well as very precise.

4. Use the figurative sense if a literal meaning would involve something immoral.

In John 6:53–55, Jesus confounded certain Jews who opposed Him with these words:

Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in yourselves. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life; and I will raise him up on the last day. For My flesh is true food, and My blood is true drink.

That’s a rather strange way of talking, to say the least. Was He suggesting that His followers become cannibals? No, that would have been a repulsive violation of the Old Testament law. And none of His listeners took it that way. They were puzzled by His words, to be sure: “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” cried the Pharisees (6:52 niv). You see, they were grappling with the problem of interpretation. Others said, “This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?” (6:60 niv). But they recognized that the Lord was speaking figuratively.

God never violates His character. And since He bases His Word on His character, we can be sure that His commandments are consistent with who He is. He never asks us to do something that He would not do or has not done Himself.

5. Use the figurative sense if the expression is an obvious figure of speech.

The biblical text often signals its use of figures of speech. Similes, for instance, use the words like or as to make comparisons: “Like a gold ring in a pig’s snout is a beautiful woman who shows no discretion” (Proverbs 11:22, italics added, niv). “[The Lord] makes Lebanon skip like a calf” (Psalm 29:6, italics added).

Scripture uses other figures of speech that make sense only when read figuratively. When Isaiah predicts that “the moon will be abashed and the

sun ashamed” (24:23), he is using an obvious personification. When Paul quotes Hosea, “O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?” (1 Corinthians 15:55), he is using a form called apostrophe, addressing a thing p 268 as if it were a person. Expressions such as “he was gathered to his people,” a man “knew” his wife, the Lord gave the people “into the hands of” their enemies, or that someone “fell asleep” are common euphemisms and idioms.

6. Use the figurative sense if a literal interpretation goes contrary to the context and scope of the passage.

Revelation 5:1–5 describes a fascinating scene before the throne of God. We read about “the Lion of the tribe of Judah.” Is the writer talking about a literal beast? Obviously not, as that would make no sense in the context. A bit of comparative study shows that he is using a title given to the Messiah. So we need to determine what that title represents and why he uses it.

Remember that in figuring out the figurative one of your best guides is the context.

7. Use the figurative if a literal interpretation goes contrary to the general character and style of the book.

This is really an extension of what we just looked at. Remember, the context of any verse is the paragraph, the section, and ultimately the book of which it is a part.

This principle applies especially to two types of literature: the prophetic, which often makes sense only if read figuratively; and the poetic, which employs imaginative language as matter of routine.

For instance, the psalmist says, “In the shadow of Thy wings I sing for joy” (Psalm 63:7). That does not mean that God has feathers. But He does

protect His children with the same watchful concern as a mother eagle for her chirping nestlings. That image fits with the general atmosphere and style of this psalm.

8. Use the figurative sense if a literal interpretation goes contrary to the plan and purpose of the author.

Again, context is crucial. Have you ever heard someone come up with an interpretation of a verse that sounds plausible in isolation, but heretical in comparison with the neighboring verses? It's a case of the ugly duckling. It doesn't fit. Something's out of place. In fact, a good habit to get into whenever p 269 you interpret a passage is to step back, look at the interpretation, and ask, what's wrong with this picture? Or does everything fall into place?

We saw in Psalm 1 that the person who delights in God's law will be like a well-watered tree. And verse 3 adds, "in whatever he does he prospers." Now some people come to that and claim that it guarantees material prosperity to every faithful believer. But does that really fit the context or the purpose of the author?

Hardly. Looking at Psalm 1 as a whole, and at the rest of the psalms, it's clear that the psalmists were far more concerned about people's walk with God than they were with their financial well-being. Psalm 1:3 makes the most sense if we understand it to describe the quality of a person's outcome, not the quantity of blessings he enjoys.

9. Use the figurative sense if a literal interpretation involves a contradiction of other Scripture.

The great interpreter of Scripture is Scripture. The Bible is unified in its message. Although it sometimes presents us with paradox, it never confounds us with contradiction.

Jesus told His followers, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Mark 10:25). What an intriguing image. People have gone to incredible lengths to try and explain what Jesus is talking about.

But one thing we know for certain: He is not saying that there can be no salvation for the rich. That’s what the disciples wondered (v. 26). But not only does He respond to that question (v. 27); the rest of Scripture teaches otherwise. For instance, Paul warns against the dangers of wealth (1 Timothy 6:17–19), but he never says that the wealthy are categorically excluded from the kingdom.

So if Mark 10 were all we had on the subject, we might have reason to wonder as the disciples did. But by comparing Scripture with Scripture, we can put it in perspective.

10. Use the figurative sense if a literal interpretation would involve a contradiction in doctrine

This follows from the point just made. We need to be consistent in our interpretation of Scripture and in the systems of belief that we build using Scripture.

In 1 Corinthians 3:16–17, Paul writes,

Do you not know that you are a temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If any man destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him, for the temple of God is holy, and that is what you are.

That is rather severe language. What does Paul mean by, “If any man destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him”? Is this a threat that if a person commits suicide, he forfeits his salvation? Some have taken it that way. But not only does that compromise the context, it conflicts with the doctrine of eternal security, the teaching that God will preserve His

children. Furthermore, Paul encourages us to read this passage and its context figuratively (4:6). A literal interpretation would make no sense.

Putting It All Together

So far in this section I've given you a lot of information on the interpretation of Scripture. I've pointed out some of the obstacles to understanding the text, along with some of the dangers to avoid. I've discussed the importance of genre and how that influences what we read. I've handed you five keys to unlocking the meaning of the text—content, context, comparison, culture, and consultation.

I reviewed some of the many kinds of secondary sources that can assist you in that consultation process. Then I focused on the use of the concordance in investigating terms. And finally I listed ten principles for figuring out the figurative passages in the biblical account.

Now let's get some involvement. In this chapter I want to demonstrate how to put these parts of the process together by looking at a specific passage, the first two verses of Romans 12. They form a paragraph, which is helpful. Remember that the paragraph forms the basic unit of Bible study. (See page 275 for the textual recreation.)

What Is "Therefore" There For?

We said that the first key to accurately interpreting Scripture is content. That is based on observation of the text. So let's start with that.

The first thing that grabs me about this text is its sense of urgency. "I urge you," verse 1 begins. "I beseech you." "I implore you." I love J. B. Phillips' rendering: "With eyes wide open to the mercies of God." So Paul comes at his readers with a sense of urgency.

The first word in the paragraph is that key word, therefore. That's essential. Remember our motto: whenever you see a therefore, stop to see

what it's there for. Here, it compels us to go back and check out the preceding context. So let's take the suggestion of the writer and step back to get the big picture of Romans.

Investigation shows that the book of Romans finds its theme in 1:17, where the writer tells us that he is talking about a "righteousness of God"—not our own righteousness, but one that He provides.

Moreover, there are three major divisions to the book. The first eight chapters deal with a righteousness that God has revealed but we must receive. Then chapters 9–11 turn to the subject of Israel, where Paul says the righteousness from God was rejected by His people. Finally, beginning in chapter 12 (where we find our passage, beginning with therefore), we come to the practical section of the book that talks about a righteousness reproduced in the believer's life.

So, on the basis of one connective, we've already got a good overview of the book.

But there's an additional phrase that forces us to see the connection: "by the mercies of God." That is to say, the mercies of God become the basis for Paul's urgent appeal. In effect, that phrase summarizes the first eleven chapters of the book. Paul is saying, essentially, "On the basis of what God has done for you, I want you to do something."

That's an important spiritual truth. God never asks us to do anything for Him until He fully informs us of what He has done for us.

What is it that He wants us to do? Verse 1 states it plainly: "to present your bodies." What does that mean? The word present is a key term, and we need to make an effort to understand it. Actually, it's a technical term. It was used p 275 of the presentation of a sacrifice to God in the Old Testament Temple. It has the idea of giving something over to another, to

relinquish one's grip on it. To "present" something means you can't give it and then later take it back. There's an element of decisiveness involved.

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to present your bodies
a living and holy sacrifice,
acceptable to God,
which is your spiritual service of worship.
2 And do not be conformed to this world,
but be transformed
by the renewing of your mind,
that you may prove what the will of God is,
that which is good
and acceptable
and perfect.**

Investigating Terms

Now as we've seen, whenever we find a term like that, we need to make extensive use of a concordance. So let's do that. A concordance tells us that the same word, present, is used in Luke 2:22:

And when the days for their purification according to the law of Moses were completed, they [that is, Mary and Joseph] brought Him [the baby Jesus] up to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord. (*Italics added*)

So Jesus was presented to God in the temple by His parents. This gives us a little insight into the life of our Lord, given the meaning of present. His parents were giving Him to God, with no thought or possibility of taking Him back.

The concordance also tells us that present is used elsewhere in the book of Romans. That's helpful, since the same term used by the same author in the same book provides a lot of insight. It's like having brothers and sisters in the same town, as opposed to distant relatives far away. In Romans 6:13 this is what we find:

And do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God. (Italics added)

Here Paul is giving you an option: You can either present your body as an instrument of righteousness, or you can present your body as an instrument of sin.

Let me illustrate. Consider a surgeon's scalpel. It is sharper than a razor, light to the touch, and sterile. In short, it is perfect for the purpose for which it was designed. But the real question is, in whose hand is it placed? In my hand it would mean butchery. But in the hand of my skilled surgeon friend, it brings healing and health to the patient. That's what Paul describes in Romans 6: Present your body to the right hands, to the Person who is going to use it skillfully to accomplish His purposes.

But notice: Paul is talking about the presentation of your body—the same as in Romans 12. What is “the body”? A word study reveals that it stands for the total person, the total being. It also represents the instrument for sacrifice. In fact, it's really the only instrument of sacrifice that we have, the only thing we can give to God. (You'll find two other uses of present in that same section of Romans [6:16 and 19]. I'll let you investigate those on your own.)

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Present also appears in Ephesians 5, in the passage about husbands and wives:

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her; that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory. (vv. 25–27, italics added)

Again we find the same word. If you are a husband, the Bible charges you with the responsibility to present your wife to God. You are accountable for the relationship with the woman God gives you.

There are several more passages we could look at, but let's take just one of them, Colossians 1:28:

And we proclaim [Christ], admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, that we may present every man complete in Christ. (Italics added)

What was Paul's purpose in building into the lives of others? To present every one of them to the Lord, so that they might come to full maturity.

Insights Through Consultation

Back in Romans 12, we need to notice several things about the presentation of our bodies to God. First, we are presenting a “living sacrifice.” That's a contradiction in terms—except in the spiritual realm. You see, we're not talking about offering a dead body but a very alive body. It is to be sacrificed to God. And it must be both holy and acceptable.

Paul gives a conclusion about doing this in the expression, “which is your spiritual service of worship.” What does that convey? It shows the expectation that presenting ourselves to God is really the least we could do, the most logical thing we could do, in light of what He has done for us.

Now we come to verse 2: “And do not be conformed to this world.” We've used the interpretational principle of comparing Scripture with Scripture to investigate the meaning of present. Here we can use it to learn something about being “conformed” to the world.

If we look up conform in a Bible dictionary, we discover that it has the idea of pouring something into a mold. Perhaps you're familiar with the process of dissolving a box of Jell-O in some boiling water and pouring it into a Jell-O mold. When it cools, it retains the shape of the mold.

That's the idea Paul uses here. “Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold,” Phillips paraphrases it. Don't take on the shape of the world. Don't allow the world to do the opposite of what God wants to do.

You see, we have an option, according to this passage. The little word but indicates a contrast, and we've learned to pay close attention to things

that are unlike. Our option—the alternative to conforming to the world’s pattern—is to “be transformed.” That, too, is a grabbing term. It actually indicates a metamorphosis, a complete makeover. It’s like the little caterpillar that builds itself a cocoon. After a time, it begins to wiggle and gradually work its way out, revealing a completely changed form as a butterfly.

But note: the transformation of the chrysalis comes from within. So it is in Romans 8. Paul indicates that by saying, “Be conformed by the renewing of your mind.”

Another principle we looked at was consultation. That is, having made our own exhaustive study of the text, we can then go to secondary sources, perhaps to a commentary, to find out what light they might throw on the passage. Consulting a commentary on this passage, we gain some profound insight. We learn that the word for “be transformed” is actually the passive form of a verb, whereas the word for “renewing” is active.

Now we may have to go back to our high school English and dust off the cobwebs. Anything passive is being acted upon; if it’s active, it is doing the acting. So Paul is saying that we don’t do the transformation; God does that. We can’t do it, so He does what we can’t do. Is there anything we can do? Yes, we can renew our minds. That’s our job. In fact, the overhauling of our thinking is what allows God to effect the transformation.

In my early days as a believer, I was heavily influenced by Donald Gray Barnhouse, the pastor of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia. In effect, he served as a mentor for me. I spent a lot of time with him, and I remember asking him once, “Dr. B., how can I find the will of God?”

I’ll never forget his response. In his typical, brusque way, he whipped around and said, “Hendricks, 90 percent of the will of God will be found

from your neck up!” And he turned around and walked off. I was a bit stunned. But all of a sudden it dawned on me why it was that Dr. Barnhouse spent so much of his time “brainwashing” my mind with the Word of God. That’s where God begins to do His work of conforming me to Christ—in my mind.

Unfortunately, most of us are conformed to this world. For the most part, we do not sit down, think through all of our options, and then make an informed decision. No, we act because our culture does it. Our society squeezes us into its mold. How? By working on our minds. That’s why it’s so dangerous to throw our minds into neutral and just go with the flow.

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“Proving” God’s Will

What is the purpose of God’s transforming work? What is it going to do for us? Paul writes, “That you may prove what the will of God is.” Word

study reveals that prove means to test or approve. For example, a person takes a piece of jewelry to an appraiser, who evaluates it and assesses its value. “That’s genuine silver,” he says, “and it’s worth this much.” In the same way, Paul says we are going to prove three things about the will of God.

First, we’re going to assess it as “good.” The term good has been devalued by our culture. Suppose I advertise a car for sale, and a prospective buyer asks, “What’s the condition?”

“It’s good,” I tell him.

His tendency will be to wonder, “What’s the matter with it?” We’ve so corrupted the word good that unless something is fantastic or perfect, we think it’s a piece of junk.

But the word used in Romans 12 is the same word used of God elsewhere in Scripture. You want to know how “good” it is? It’s as good as God is.

Moreover, Paul says it’s “acceptable,” not only in prospect, but also in retrospect. We couldn’t add anything to the will of God and in any way improve it. We couldn’t take anything away from it and in any way make it better. His will is totally, absolutely acceptable.

And if that’s not enough, it’s also “perfect.” Again, it’s as perfect as God is. It matches His character, His holiness.

Such is the will of God. That’s what He wants us to test in our lives. Unfortunately, most people spend the bulk of their lives trying to find the will of God, when all the while they’ve never presented their bodies as a living sacrifice.

An additional discovery that we make from a commentary is that the key verb in this passage, “to present,” happens to be in a form called an

aorist tense. The aorist form of this verb indicates decisiveness. This is a major division in our lives, a point at which we present ourselves to God, just as Jesus was presented. There's no turning back. It describes a complete commitment to God, for Him to do with us whatever He desires.

Imagine a notebook full of pages that represent the will of God for particular aspects of your life. And you say to God, "This is my life as it is right now, as well as I know it. I want to present everything I am to You." And you give that notebook to God; you present it to Him in an act of complete and utter commitment.

But then at a later date, you discover additional material that you weren't able to include in the notebook originally. What then? Well, you already know where the notebook is—you've given it to God. Your life belongs to Him. So as you come across new areas of your life, you can take those and present them to God as well.

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Obviously you can't present your wife to God if you are a single person. You're not even married. Nor could you know how many children you might have. But the moment God gives you a marriage or children, then you already know exactly where they belong in terms of God's will. They go in the same notebook that you presented to God in the first place.

That's the idea of "present" in the aorist tense, as it appears in this passage.

Now look back over Romans 12:1–2 as we've discussed it in this chapter. See if this does not flesh out some of the interpretational principles that we've been talking about. First we looked at the content of the text. We made all kinds of observations that gave us a database for understanding Paul's message. We also looked at the context. "Therefore" led us to go back and examine the book as a whole. We did some comparison of Scripture, using a concordance. We chased down the verbs "to present" and "be conformed."

Then we did a little consulting. We looked up a few things in a commentary. We discovered that "present" indicates a decisive commitment of ourselves to Jesus Christ. We also found out what the transformation involves. It is something God does; the renewing of our mind is something that we do.

And so, even though we've just gotten our foot in the door of this passage, we've come up with an accurate, perceptive, biblical understanding of what God wants us to do with our bodies as His redeemed people.

Don't Stop Now!

We live in a society that is drowning in a sea of information. With each passing day, the amount of information available to us grows exponentially.

This surfeit of data poses a good news-bad news dilemma. On the one hand, we don't have to be enslaved to ignorance. Mention just about any subject, and there's a good probability that someone somewhere has looked into it. That kind of wide-ranging expertise brings about incredible developments in fields such as medicine, physics, biotechnology, agriculture, transportation, and communication.

On the other hand, how do we find the information we're looking for? We're no longer searching for the proverbial needle in a haystack; we're searching for a needle in a haystack made of needles. Furthermore, even though we have a lot of data, much of it is of little practical use. And that's the real issue, isn't it? How to use the information. Yet it seems that more and more careers are built around information-gathering rather than information-productivity.

The same phenomenon holds for Bible study. The majority of people who study the Scriptures get log jammed in the step of Interpretation. In the first place they begin there, which is a major mistake. And furthermore they stop there, which is an even bigger mistake.

The result is that they acquire mountains of data about the text, and lots of speculation about what that data means. But what difference does it make in their lives? The Bible becomes little more than a collection of theological brainteasers, rather than a road map for how to live.

What a tragedy, because the Word of God does not bear fruit when it is understood, only when it is applied. That's why James exhorts us to "receive the word implanted" (1:21). In other words, let God's truth take root in your life. How? By proving yourself to be a doer of the word, not merely a hearer (v. 22).

Imagine plowing a field, dropping seed in the ground, carefully tending the plants that shoot up, pulling out the weeds, waiting for the rains, and then, just as harvest time arrives, walking off to do something else. A person would starve pretty quickly doing that. Yet that's what happens if you fail to move on to the next step in the Bible study process, Application. You can go to all the trouble of preparing a rich harvest and yet starve spiritually by neglecting to follow through.

I hope by now that you are hungry to see results in your life. If so, I invite you to move on with me to the next section, where we'll explore some ways to turn biblical investigations into practical applications.