

# How to Study Your Bible

---

Alistair Huong

## Introduction

*Those who are engaged in proclaiming the third angel's message are searching the Scriptures upon the same plan that Father Miller adopted. In the little book entitled "Views of the Prophecies and Prophetic Chronology," Father Miller gives the following simple but intelligent and important rules for Bible study and interpretation: {RH, November 25, 1884 par. 23}*

*[See Miller's Rules of Interpretation Handout]*

*The above is a portion of these rules; and in **our study of the Bible we shall all do well to heed the principles set forth.** {RH, November 25, 1884 par. 25}*

## Foundational Principles

1. **The Presupposition Principle** – We put aside our presuppositions when we approach the Word, and allow the Bible to speak to us. We don't impose our own ideas into the Word.

*How shall we search the Scriptures in order to understand what they teach? We should come to the investigation of God's word with a **contrite heart, a teachable and prayerful spirit.** We are not to think, as did the Jews, that **our own ideas and opinions are infallible**; nor with the papists, that certain individuals are the sole guardians of truth and knowledge, that men have no right to search the Scriptures for themselves, but must accept the explanations given by the Fathers of the church. We should not study the Bible for the purpose of **sustaining our preconceived opinions**, but with the **single object of learning what God has said.** {GW92 125.1}*

*The student of the Bible should be taught to approach it in the **spirit of a learner.** We are to search its pages, **not for proof to sustain our opinions**, but **in order to know what God says.** {Ed 189.1}*

Ex: Isa 30:25 – Is this talking about 9/11?

2. **The Thought Inspiration Principle** – God inspired the Bible writers by giving them visions/dreams. They took the concepts/thoughts that they were given and communicated them to us in their own words. God did not dictate to them the exact words for them to write.

*The Bible is written by inspired men, but it is not God's mode of thought and expression. It is that of humanity. God, as a writer, is not represented. Men will often say such an expression is not like God. But God has not put Himself in words, in logic, in rhetoric, on trial in the Bible. **The writers of the Bible were God's penmen, not His pen.** Look at the different writers. {1SM 21.1}*

***It is not the words of the Bible that are inspired, but the men that were inspired.** Inspiration acts not on the man's words or his expressions but on the man himself, who, under the influence of the Holy Ghost, is **imbued with thoughts**. But the words receive the impress of the individual mind. The divine mind is diffused. The divine mind and will is combined with the human mind and will; thus the utterances of the man are the word of God.-- Manuscript 24, 1886 (written in Europe in 1886). {1SM 21.2}*

Ex: Two demoniacs mentioned in Matt. 8, while only one mentioned in Mark 5 and Luke 8. Apparent discrepancies sometimes can simply be authors writing with different emphases or frames of reference. The thought is still intact but the exact words may differ.

3. **The Revelation Principle** – God is interested in revealing things to us, not hide them from us. However, our dull minds and sinful tendencies are what make it difficult. God is trying to reveal the truth to us, not hide it. This is an outgrowth of his character of love and His eagerness to redeem fallen man.

*Your God is a **revealer of secrets**. [Daniel 2:47]*

*Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you. [Matt 7:7]*

*Ever since the fall of man, Christ had been the **Revealer of truth** to the world. By Him the incorruptible seed, "the word of God, which liveth and abideth forever," is communicated to men. 1 Peter 1:23. [COL 37.1]*

Ex: 2 Pet 1:20 – No prophecy is of any private interpretation. If someone says, "I've discovered something that no one else has," it's probably not true. They have the presupposition that God is in the business of hiding things. "Secret info on closed-door meeting with the Pope." Will God cause those to be lost who didn't have access to this information?

4. **The Human Language Principle** – God wrote the Bible in OUR language using men of like passions as us. So the plain reading of the Word is the best.

*The Bible is **not** given to us in **grand superhuman language**. Jesus, in order to reach man where he is, took humanity. The Bible must be given in the **language of men**. Everything that is **human is imperfect**. Different meanings are expressed by the same word; there is not one word for each distinct idea. The Bible was given for **practical purposes**. [1SM 20.2]*

Ex: Daniel 3:16-18 can result in two different readings. Human language is imperfect in that it is imprecise and finite.

5. **The Spiritual Things Principle** – We don't expect people without faith to understand. You must come to God believing. (Miller #13)

*But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. [1 Cor 2:14]*

*But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him. [Heb 11:6]*

*Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will shew you things to come. [John 16:13]*

*Christ is the truth. His words are truth, and they have a **deeper significance** than appears on the surface. All the sayings of Christ have a **value beyond their unpretending appearance**. Minds that are **quickened by the Holy Spirit will discern** the value of these sayings. They will discern the precious gems of truth, though these may be buried treasures. {COL 110.1}*

Ex: John 6:51,52 - When Jesus said "Eat my flesh, drink my blood."

6. **The "Hoof beat" Principle** - "When you hear hoof beats, don't think zebras." (Miller #7) Use common sense, employ rational thinking, and follow the rules of language. If you have to have a PhD or if you have to suspend your common sense, it probably isn't true. Take the Bible as it reads. The simplest, most obvious meaning of the text is almost always the right one.

*The truths most plainly revealed in the Bible have been involved in doubt and darkness by learned men, who, with a pretense of great wisdom, teach that **the Scriptures have a mystical, a secret, spiritual meaning not apparent in the language employed**. These men are false teachers. It was to such a class that Jesus declared: "Ye know not the Scriptures, neither the power of God." Mark 12:24. The language of the Bible should be explained according to **its obvious meaning**, unless a symbol or figure is employed. Christ has given the promise: "If any man will do His will, he shall know of the doctrine." John 7:17. If men would but **take the Bible as it reads**, if there were no false teachers to mislead and confuse their minds, a work would be accomplished that would make angels glad and that would bring into the fold of Christ thousands upon thousands who are now wandering in error. [GC 598.3]*

*We must be careful lest we misinterpret the Scriptures. The plain teachings of the Word of God are not to be **so spiritualized that the reality is lost sight of**. Do not **overstrain the meaning of sentences in the Bible** in an effort to bring forth **something odd in order to please the fancy**. Take the Scriptures **as they read**. Avoid idle speculation concerning what will be in the kingdom of heaven. [1SM 170.2]*

Ex: Lev 11:2,3 - Plainly talking about animals that can/can't be eaten. Not a spiritualized symbols of Christians. The plain reading is usually the best reading.

7. **The Emotions Principle** - Truth is not determined by how we feel about it. Just because something makes you excited doesn't mean that it's right. Although finding truth, can and should make you excited.

*Genuine faith is founded on the Scriptures; but Satan uses so many devices to wrest the Scriptures and bring in error, that great care is needed if one would know what they really do teach. It is one of the great delusions of this time to **dwell much upon feeling**, and to claim honesty while ignoring the plain utterances of the word of God because that word does not coincide with feeling. Many have **no foundation for their faith but emotion**. Their religion **consists in excitement**; when that ceases, their faith is gone. Feeling may be chaff, but the word of God is the wheat. And "what," says the prophet, "is the chaff to the wheat?" [RH, November 25, 1884 par. 26]*

Ex: 9T 11 and it's relationship to 9/11.

8. **The True > New Principle** - The burden of Bible study is primarily to find out what's TRUE, not what's NEW.

*Popular revivals are too often carried by appeals to the imagination, by exciting the emotions, by **gratifying the love for what is new and startling**. Converts thus gained have **little desire to listen to Bible truth**, little interest in the testimony of prophets and apostles. Unless a religious service has something of a sensational character, it has no attractions for them. A message which appeals to **unimpassioned reason awakens no response**. The **plain warnings of God's word**, relating directly to their eternal interests, are **unheeded**. [GC 463.2]*

*"Jesus answered them, and said, My doctrine is not mine, but his that sent me." My words are in perfect harmony with the Old Testament Scriptures, and with the law spoken from Sinai. I am **not preaching a new doctrine**. I am presenting **old truths** rescued from the framework of error, and placed in a **new setting**. [5BC 1136.2]*

Ex: Gentleman at an evangelistic crusade who told me that Adventism is a ruse because there hasn't been "new light" since 1844. His idea was that we needed new time prophecies from Revelation. Others have gravitated toward false prophets.

9. **The Big Picture Principle** – Study with the big picture/theme in mind. The individual concepts, principles, themes, and thoughts must fit within the framework.

*The Bible is its own expositor. Scripture is to be compared with scripture. The student should learn to view **the word as a whole**, and to see the **relation of its parts**. He should gain a knowledge of its **grand central theme**, of **God's original purpose for the world**, of the rise of **the great controversy**, and of **the work of redemption**. [Ed 190.2]*

*The life and character of Christ were living epistles of the truths he taught, and by his example he inspired faith in his followers. He presented himself as the One referred to by the prophets, especially stating, "They wrote of me." He came to represent the Father; he was the brightness of his glory, the express image of his person. **He was the subject of all the lessons** he gave his disciples, the theme to which their attention must be riveted. **He was the great center of all**, and faith in him was to bring eternal life to all who would receive him. When he presented before them illustrious persons, it was simply to impress them with the fact that he was greater than all the wise and great of earth. He sought to make them understand the significance of the rites of the Jewish church, and as their dull comprehension became more and more enlightened, he impressed them with the thought that he was the originator and substance of all truth. The types and rites of the Jewish church were **all connected with himself**; he was **the glory of the whole system**. Everything that was attractive, either in nature or revelation, was **found in him**; he was the **all-absorbing theme of patriarchs and prophets**,--the first and the last, the Alpha and the Omega of all things. {RH, October 14, 1890 par. 2}*

Ex: The Great Controversy theme provides the cohesion to rule out certain teachings—things like the immortal soul or an ever-burning hell or the cause of sin and suffering. Christ is the central figure of the Bible.

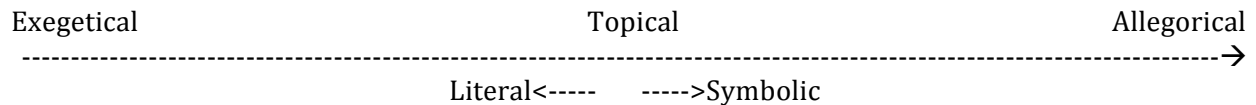
10. **The “No Pain, No Gain” Principle** – There is no shortcut. It will take consistent, continuous effort.

*The study of the Bible demands **our most diligent effort and persevering thought**. As the miner digs for the golden treasure in the earth, so **earnestly, persistently**, must we seek for the treasure of God's word. {Ed 189.3}*

*It is proper and right to read the Bible; but your duty does not end there; for you are to search its pages for yourselves. The knowledge of God is not to be gained without **mental effort**, without prayer for wisdom in order that you may separate from the pure grain of truth the chaff with which men and Satan have misrepresented the doctrines of truth. [FE 307.2]*

Ex: Psalm 126:6 – Precious seed. It's precious because of the effort the farmer exerted to obtain that seed. (i.e. diligent study)

## Major Approaches to the Text



1. **Exegetical/Verse by Verse** – Foundation of all Bible study.

*In daily study the **verse-by-verse method is often most helpful**. Let the student take one verse, and concentrate the mind on **ascertaining the thought that God has put into that verse for him**, and then dwell upon the thought until it becomes his own. **One passage thus studied until its significance is clear** is of more value than the perusal of many chapters with no definite purpose in view and no positive instruction gained. [Ed 189.4]*

Pitfall: It becomes simply an academic exercise. Simply discovering what the original author said and nothing more. May cause the Bible to become a dry human history book.

2. **Topical/Doctrinal** – Must be based on solid exegetical study first. So we know that the single verse we are using is used appropriately. Also biographical, subject, doctrinal, word study.

*To understand doctrine, bring **all the Scriptures together on the subject** you wish to know; then let every word have its proper influence, and if you can form your theory without a contradiction, you cannot be in an error (Isaiah 28:7-29; 35:8; Proverbs 19:27; Luke 24:27, 44, 45; James 5:19; 2 Peter 1:19, 20). [Miller's Rules of Interpretation]*

*The Bible is its own expositor. **Scripture is to be compared with scripture**. The student should learn to view the word **as a whole**, and to see **the relation of its parts**. [Ed 190.2]*

Example: Sabbath – Eden [Gen 2:2-3], Jesus [Luke 4:16; 23:52-24:3], Paul [Acts 13:14; 13:42-44; 17:2; 18:4], New Earth [Isa 66:22-23].

Pitfall: Fall into the trap of proof-texting. Using verses to defend our ideas even at the expense of going against the original intent of the author.

3. **Allegorical/Typological/Symbolic** – Must be based on the previous two. Lion of the Tribe of Judah – how do we know it's not Satan, the lion seeking who he may devour? We need to have done the topical research before.

*The language of the Bible should be explained according to **its obvious meaning, unless a symbol or figure is employed.** [GC 598.3]*

*How to know when a word is used figuratively. If it makes good sense as it stands, and does no violence to the simple laws of nature, then it must be **understood literally; if not, figuratively** (Revelation 12:1, 2; 17:3-7). [Miller's Rules of Interpretation]*

*To learn the true meaning of figures, **trace your figurative word through the Bible**, and, where you find it explained, put it on your figure, and if it makes good sense, you need look no further; if not, look again. [Miller's Rules of Interpretation]*

*Parables are used as comparisons to illustrate subjects, and **must be explained in the same way as figures**, by the subject and Bible (Mark 4:13). [Miller's Rules of Interpretation]*

Valid Type/Symbol: We must be clear that the allegory, type, or symbols are warranted from the Bible passages themselves. The way we know is by first having conducted the exegetical and topical studies. Noah, Lot, Elijah and the end-times vs. China as the red dragon and Russia as the bear.

Example: Why is the Lion of the tribe of Judah [Rev 5:5] Jesus? Judah's lion [Gen 49:9-10] vs. Satan's lion [1 Pet 5:8]. The answer is in the context of each passage. Judah's lion is associated with rulership (scepter) while Satan's lion is devouring God's people.

Pitfall: Fall into trap of spiritualizing the truth away and eroding Biblical rules for interpretation, ending up like the Dark Ages. Protestant Reformation's greatest gift was revitalizing a literal reading of the Word, and giving it back to the people.

## Genres

Different genres of the Bible were written with different intents, and so requires us to utilize common sense in differentiating best strategies to understand them.

- **Historical narratives** (Genesis, Exodus, Esther, Nehemiah, Gospels, Acts, etc.)– Stories and narratives.
- **Law** (Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy) – Legal mandates and instructions.
- **Epistles** (Pauline and general epistles) – Letters dealing with specific issues.
- **Poetry** (Psalms, Song of Solomon) – Poetry is exceptional in portraying emotion. Much more impact from the structure, mechanic, and technique in constructing the phrases.
- **Wisdom** (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes) – Short, pithy general truisms or treatment on maxims and sayings.
- **Prophecy** (Major/minor prophets, Daniel, Revelation) – Mixture of some narrative, epistles, symbols. D&R specifically are considered apocalyptic/eschatological.

Notice that most of these genres are intended to be read in a verse-by-verse fashion, and not skipped around like we typically do.

Tip: When just learning how to study, start with the historical stories. This lays the foundation for all other types of study. (For added oomph, read the *Conflict of the Ages* series along side the historical stories.)

## Practical Tools

1. **Observation** – “What does this passage say?” This is simply collecting all the facts.
2. **Interpretation** – “What does this passage mean?” In the universal sense usually derived by seeing what the original author intended to communicate to the audience.
3. **Application** – “What does this passage mean to me/us/you/etc.” This is derived by gleaning the principle out of the interpretation of the text. (How Paul’s council to Corinth may give guidance for today.)

### Observation

This is the most important step. The more time you spend here, the easier the rest of them become.

- What is the genre?
- Who is the author writing to? Who’s the audience?
- Read multiple times.
- Read in different versions/languages.
- Read widely (helpful to have the big picture in your mind across multiple chapters/books/time periods).
- Look wide and look narrow – Big concepts and details.
- Outline the chapter/book you are studying.
- Stop at each word/phrase.
- Notice the tenses, expressions, numbers, pronouns, etc.
- Ask the basic questions of: Who, what, when, where, why, how?
- Notice what’s stated and what’s not stated. Ask yourself, “What does it say?” and “What does it not say?”
- Imagine yourself in the story as each character.
- Get the historical context of the situation whenever possible.
- Resist the urge to jump to conclusions.
- Paraphrase the passage in your own words.
- Be mindful of context.

### **Two Types of Context (always in this order):**

1. Literary Context – The surrounding words.
2. Cultural/Historical Context – The surrounding circumstances.

**How to Get the Context:** Start narrow, then work outward in this order.

1. Nearby verses - Isa 28:9,10. Literal ways to train a child. Not timelines.
2. Nearby chapters – Daniel 8 & 9. 70 weeks cut off from what?
3. Related books (Based on genre/author/history) – D&R, Jeremiah/Lamentations, John/Revelation, Pauline epistles/Acts
4. Other books of the Bible
5. Spirit of Prophecy
6. Non-inspired resources (commentaries, Bible dictionaries, historical books, etc.)

*Activity: Observation*

*Gather as many facts as possible about this passage.*

Interpretation

This can be the trickiest of the steps.

- What was the author trying to communicate to his/her audience?
- Synthesize the facts gleaned from observation.
- Seek to answer questions that arise from observation.
- Don't roam beyond the facts established in observation.
- Don't jump to application too quickly.
- Review William Miller's principles of interpretation if needed.
- No private interpretation – if in doubt, submit to brethren of experience.

*Activity: Interpretation*

*What is Paul trying to communicate to his audience in this passage?*

Application

If you've done your homework in observation and interpretation, application is usually the easiest (and most exciting!) part.

- Look for universal principles to apply, not some random detail.
- Finding application for yourself in devotional study will be different than that for others in teaching/preaching.
- When applying for others – Think of the makeup of your congregation, young person/middle aged/elderly.
- Remember that the Bible teaches not only the doctrinal information, but also the manner in which we portray and present them. Ex: Preaching the truth about the Papacy without compromise by running newspaper ads and billboards, but the Bible also teaches to be wise as serpents and harmless as doves. Application extends simply beyond the information, but the actual portrayal and presentation.

*Activity: Application*

*What principles can I implement in my life today?*

## Review of the 3 Major Approaches

1. **Exegetical:** Heb 11:17-19 as an exposition on Abraham's test within the context of Paul's discourse on faith.
2. **Topical:** Heb 11:17-19 as a component of a study on topics such as: Faith, obedience, God's Word, life of Abraham/Isaac, the Great Controversy, etc.



3. **Allegorical:** Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac was a symbol of God giving His only begotten son. It also illustrates how Christ took Isaac's place as the ram caught in the thicket. This is only valid because it is verified elsewhere in Inspiration. [PP 155]

## Conclusion

*Brethren, cling to your Bible, as it reads...and obey the Word, and not one of you will be lost. [1SM 18.4]*

## Additional Resources

1. Introduction to *The Great Controversy*
2. *Education*, Chapters 9-20
3. *Selected Messages*, Vol. 1
4. Official SDA "Methods of Bible Study": <http://www.adventist.org/information/official-statements/documents/article/go/0/methods-of-bible-study/>