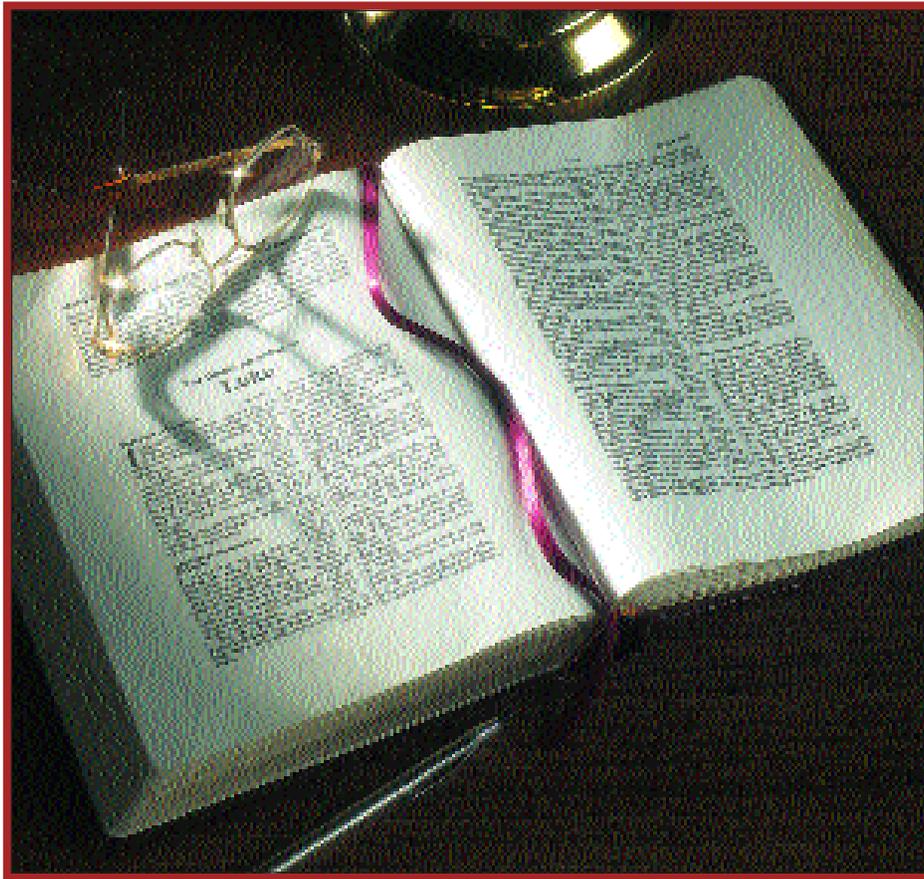


**GoodNews**

P R E S E N T S



# How to Understand the Bible

---

# Introduction

**T**he Bible is the world's best-selling book. Year after year millions of copies are sold or given away. Although most ancient books have disappeared from memory, the Bible continues to be printed more than any other book on earth and is available in more than 2,000 languages. It has helped form the basis for Western society and has shaped much of its religious, economic and social outlook.

Yet, in spite of the Bible's popularity, it has also aptly been described as the world's most misunder-

stood book. Although millions of people are Bible readers, many find it hard to understand. Some even give up trying, thinking it too confusing.

Possibly you have been one of those who have found the Bible difficult to comprehend. Perhaps you wish you knew how to better apply its timeless principles, how to use it to build a right relationship with its author, your Creator.

How can you become one of those who *do* understand what the Scriptures say?

Let's look to the Bible itself for the answer. There are ways to better grasp what it says to mankind. Throughout its pages are principles that, when applied, can help your comprehension. We will examine seven keys that will help open up this Book of books to your understanding.

## Things to Keep in Mind About the Bible

"Today there is not a language in the civilized world into which this word of God has not been rendered" (*The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Vol. 1, p. 492).

"One of the most notable conversions to the Bible was Sir William Ramsay. He was an atheist, and son of atheists. He was wealthy and proudly bore a Doctor of Philosophy degree from Oxford University. He gave his whole life to the study of archaeology so he could refute the Bible. He finally departed for the Holy Land, with his chief aim to refute the book of Acts. After 25 years of work, he became so impressed with the accuracy of Luke, its writer, that he finally concluded it was an exact account even in its smallest details. In his attempt to disprove the Bible, Sir William Ramsay discovered hundreds of historical facts which confirmed the Biblical account. Finally, in one of his books, he shook the world of the Bible critics when he confessed he had accepted Christianity" (D. James Kennedy, *Why I Believe*, 1980, p. 28).

"It has been my custom for many years to read the Bible in its entirety once a year" (John Quincy Adams).

"A thorough knowledge of the Bible is worth more than a college education" (Theodore Roosevelt).

"Belief in the Bible, the fruit of deep meditation, has served me as the guide of my moral and literary life. I have found it a capital safely invested, and richly productive of interest" (Johann Wolfgang von Goethe).

"If we abide by the principles taught

by the Bible, our country will go on prospering" (Daniel Webster).

"I believe the Bible is the best gift that God has ever given to man. All the good from the Savior of the world is communicated to us through this Book. I have been driven many times to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go" (Abraham Lincoln).

"The majesty of the Scriptures strikes me with admiration, as the purity of the Gospel has its influence on my heart. Pursue the works of our philosophers with all their pomp of diction, how mean, how contemptible are they, compared with the Scriptures" (Jean-Jacques Rousseau).

"It is impossible to rightly govern the world without God and the Bible" (George Washington).

"The Bible is the rock on which our republic rests" (Andrew Jackson).

"It is impossible to mentally or socially enslave a Bible-reading people" (Horace Greeley).

"The foundations of our society and our government rest so much on the teachings of the Bible that it would be difficult to support them if faith in these teachings would cease to be practically universal in our country" (Calvin Coolidge).

"We reject with scorn all these learned and labored myths that Moses was but a legendary figure. We believe that the most scientific view, the most up-to-date and rationalistic conception, will find its fullest satisfaction in taking the Bible story literally" (Winston Churchill).

First key:

# Ask for God's Guidance in a Proper Attitude

Curiously enough, we find that the Bible is not a book that can be readily understood by everyone. How, then, can we come to understand it?

Our first step is to humbly ask God for help.

Prayer, coming to God to humbly ask for His help, is the first vital key to understanding His Word.

God describes the kind of attitude and approach He respects: "But on this one will I look: on him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at my word" (Isaiah 66:2).

God does not play favorites; He is not concerned with the color of a person's skin or his nationality. He looks on the heart, the attitude and approach, to determine whether to give understanding. Peter tells us, "In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality. But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him" (Acts 10:34-35).

Jesus Christ thanked God the Father for the way He chose whom to give spiritual understanding: "I thank You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have *hidden* these things from the wise and prudent and *revealed* them to babes . . . No one knows who the Son is except the Father, and who the Father is except the Son, and the one to whom the Son wills to reveal Him" (Luke 10:21-22, emphasis added throughout).

God reserves the right to choose those to whom He will reveal spiritual understanding. Sometimes one whom God so chooses may indeed hold to views that oppose the truth, as did the apostle Paul. God miraculously called this man who had vigorously persecuted the early Christians, then opened his mind and used him as a powerful tool to reveal a wealth of spiritual truth and write much of what we know as the New Testament.

Notice the importance of God's involvement in our understanding of the Bible. Christ said to His disciples: "These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must

be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me. And *He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures*" (Luke 24:44-45). It was not their intellect that let them grasp the meaning; they had to have divine help.

Many overlook this point in studying the Bible. Even though we might possess the world's brightest minds, if God does not act to open our minds, the Bible will remain closed to us. The apostle Paul explained: "These things [God's Word] we also speak, not in words which man's wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing *spiritual* things with spiritual. But the natural man *does not receive* the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are *spiritually discerned*" (1 Corinthians 2:13-14).

Because God inspired the Bible, it follows that it is not a mere book that takes only a measure of intellectual effort to understand. God reserves the right to grant an understanding of His precious truths to whomever He will.

*How* we read the Bible—our motivation in studying it—is important. If we feel compelled to read it to please others or pore over it only as a religious duty, God likely will not open the Scriptures' true meaning to us. His truths will remain hidden. How, then, can we find these truths?

As we have seen, the first key to understanding Scripture is to ask for God's help with a right attitude: "And you will seek Me and find Me, *when you search for me with all your heart*" (Jeremiah 29:13).

Why is attitude so important? Paul reveals the answer: "But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, *that no flesh should glory* in His presence" (1 Corinthians 1:27-29). No one will be able to boast that he was able to rightly understand God's spiritual truths with only his native intelligence and his own effort.

On the other hand, once a person humbly asks God for help and is committed to obeying what he learns, he is on the right track. Christ explained this to His disciples: "Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore whoever *humbles* himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:3-4). No matter how intelligent we may be, if we don't humble ourselves and become teachable as a small child, God will not help us grasp His Word.

God promises that He will faithfully answer a humble request for understanding from those with

whom He is working. James writes: “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him” (James 1:5).

All through the Bible we see examples of people who asked humbly for godly wisdom and were rewarded. Examples are David, Solomon, Daniel, Esther and Jesus’ first disciples.

On the other hand, others are prime examples of those who relied on their own ability and were subsequently humiliated, such as Cain, the Pharaoh of the Exodus, King Saul, Nebuchadnezzar, the Pharisees and Herod Agrippa.

An example of a proper, humble, godly approach is that of the Bereans, mentioned in Acts 17:10-12: “[The Bereans] were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so. Therefore many of them believed, and also not a few of the Greeks, prominent women as well as men.”

Unlike others, the Bereans did not immediately reject what Paul was saying, even though many things they heard contradicted their own long-held beliefs. They carefully reviewed the Scriptures with an open mind and saw that what Paul had said made sense. Then, after diligently searching the Scriptures, they verified that what he taught was indeed the truth, and they humbly accepted his teachings.

Similarly, if we want to understand the Bible, we need the attitude of the Bereans. We need to carefully review the Scriptures, not taking our beliefs for granted, because, as the Bereans

found, our own ideas can be wrong.

Is humility, then, all that is needed? That a person begins with a humble attitude doesn’t mean he will continue that approach and gain the understanding he seeks. The Bible shows that some who come to an understanding of certain basic revealed spiritual truths will lose that comprehension because they do not *act* on them. By rejecting knowledge revealed by God, they choose to lay aside their humility and exalt their own point of view.

Jesus illustrated, in His explanation of the parable of the sower, why some will understand while others will not: “To you it has been *given* to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God, but to the rest it is given in parables, that ‘Seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand.’

“Now the parable is this: The *seed* is the word of God. Those by the wayside are the ones who hear; then the devil comes and takes away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved. But the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no root, who believe for a while and in time of temptation fall away.

“Now the ones that fell among *thorns* are those who, when they have heard, go out and are choked with cares, riches, and pleasures of life, and bring *no fruit* to maturity. But the ones that fell on the *good ground* are those who, having heard the word with a noble and good heart, keep it and *bear fruit* with patience” (Luke 8:10-15).

There, in Christ’s words, are some of the reasons people fail to grow in spiritual understanding. Most do not persevere in God’s Word because

## Marking Your Bible

The Bible looks formidable, with its hundreds of pages of small print. However, the Bible is a book designed to be *used*. To familiarize yourself with key verses, it is a good idea to mark your Bible to help you relocate particular passages. The methods used by students of the Bible range from one color to elaborate color keys, arrows, notes and brackets and the underlining of words, phrases and sentences.

Anyone who goes through the process of marking his Bible will appreciate the need for simplicity. After a while a Bible can end up looking like a messy coloring book. A few guidelines will help avoid overmarking your Bible.

Use colors to highlight only important words. Be sure to select a pen or marker that will not run, smear or bleed through

the page. When underlining phrases, use a ruler. With a proper mark, an important word or phrase should instantly let you know what is the subject matter.

Marking the Bible will help you get a feel of where you are in a particular page. It will save much time trying to locate that special scripture.

Many computerized Bible-study programs will allow you to type your own notes (or import them from other electronic text files) and attach them to specific verses, letting you create your own personal commentaries (see “Computer Bible Helps”). This method allows a virtually unlimited amount of space for your personal notes and comments while keeping them neat and orderly. Such electronic notes can later be edited, expanded or deleted much more easily than handwritten notes in a printed Bible.

of negligence, lack of faith or a self-centered rather than godly outlook.

An attitude of prayerfully, humbly seeking help from God so we can learn, leading to putting into practice what we do learn, is the first key to understanding God's truths in the Bible. You can put this principle into practice by asking God to enlighten, teach, instruct and correct you from His Word and lead you in understanding it.

Second key:

## Obedience Brings Understanding

A second key follows logically from the first: A right attitude leads to a proper obedience of God's laws, which form much of the foundation of the Bible.

James explains that you must be “doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does” (James 1:22-25).

We see, then, that applying what we learn from God's Word is necessary, along with a humble approach. We must begin to *live what we learn* for God to grant us continued understanding.

If we refuse to accept the understanding God reveals to us, He ceases to give us more of it. God explains this principle: “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. *Because you have rejected knowledge, I also will reject you . . .*” (Hosea 4:6).

For us to understand the Bible, we must first learn about and respect God's law. We read a summary of this principle in Psalm 111:10: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; a good understanding have all those who do His commandments . . .”

Paul emphasizes this point in Romans 2:13: “For not the hearers of the law are just in the sight of God, but the *doers* of the law will be justified.” If a person studies the Bible just to hear what it says, but not to do what it commands, he is not

pleasing God and cannot expect His help.

Sadly, many think Jesus Christ came to do away with the law, but He denied this in the strongest terms. “Do *not* think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets,” He warned. “I did not come to destroy but to *fulfill*. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled” (Matthew 5:17-18).

Jesus was explaining that all of God's commandments should be “fulfilled” in a more-complete way than that taught by the Pharisees. He stressed that we should take into account the spiritual intent of the law and not just the letter. He showed that *both* aspects of law-keeping are necessary to truly obey God.

To those who followed Him, but did not obey God's laws, He said, “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father in heaven” (Matthew 7:21). Christ expected His followers to deeply respect God's commandments, as He always respected and obeyed them. His view was clear: “If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love” (John 15:10). Christ's teachings uphold God's commandments. They do not do away with them.

The apostle Peter wrote of people who desire to receive the Holy Spirit, a requirement for understanding the Scriptures. “And we are His witnesses to these things, and so also is the Holy Spirit [which] God has given to *those who obey Him*” (Acts 5:32).

Therefore, to understand revealed spiritual truths requires the second key, which is faithful obedience to God's perfect laws and instruction as shown in Scripture.

Though obedience is necessary for continued spiritual understanding, this does not mean that obedience entitles us to salvation. God alone, through His grace and mercy, forgives sin, grants us help to overcome and offers salvation as a gift. However, God does expect us to do our part while He fulfills the rest. James emphasized this principle: “Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he [in order to obey] offered Isaac his son on the altar? Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was *made perfect*?” (James 2:21-22).

The many benefits of obedience will quickly manifest themselves to the doer. “Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good,” wrote King David (Psalm 34:8). Jesus Christ said: “Whoever chooses to *do the will of God* will know whether my teaching comes from him or is merely my own” (John 7:17, Revised English Bible). An attitude of humble, willing obedience is the litmus test!

## Third key:

# Accept the Inspiration of All the Bible

The third key involves the way we view the Scriptures. To understand them, we must accept the authority over us of all the Bible. All the books of the Bible—in both the Old and New Testaments—are inspired by God.

God assures us that we can absolutely trust the Holy Scriptures. “*All Scripture is given by inspiration of God,*” wrote Paul, “and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

This is a powerful statement. It means we can confidently accept the Bible, as originally written, as the inspired and infallible Word of God. What has been handed down to us are various versions and differing translations, none of which is free of occasional human error. Therefore, a comparison among the versions is helpful (See “Which Bible Version Is Best?”).

We can rest assured that the differences are minimal among the major versions that are faithfully based on the Hebrew and Greek texts. Many ancient copies have been used to ferret out almost all mistakes introduced through copying the text over the centuries. Basic truths are faithfully preserved.

What evidence do we have that *all* the Bible is inspired by God? That is an important question. If the Bible were just another religious book written thousands of years ago, why would we need it? After all, we have plenty of those already available, and new books on religion appear almost every day. What makes the Bible one of a kind is its consistency. Its underlying principles never changed throughout the 1,500 years of its creation.

Some 40 authors composed the various books of the Bible over the centuries, and only a few of its writers personally knew any of the others. Yet a continual unity of thought is obvious in their writings. The religious writings that form the bases for other religions and philosophies are imperfect. They contain both easily identifiable doctrinal and historical errors and inconsistencies.

Only the Bible has held up under centuries of scrutiny from historians, critics and the archaeolo-

gist’s spade. Unparalleled in the history of literature, the Bible has proved reliable in ways unmatched by other books.

Gleason Archer, a scholar of biblical studies and languages of recent years, writes about attributes of the Bible: “As I have dealt with one apparent discrepancy after another and have studied the alleged contradictions between the biblical record and the evidence of linguistics, archaeology, or science, my confidence in the trustworthiness of Scripture has been repeatedly verified and strengthened by the discovery that almost every problem in Scripture that has ever been discovered by man, from ancient times until now, has been dealt with in a completely satisfactory manner by the biblical text itself—or else by objective archaeological information” (*Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1982, p. 12).

Not only is the Bible historically accurate, but its unifying principles are found from the beginning to the end of the Scriptures. Faith, for example, is one of those unifying principles. Back in Genesis 4, at the beginning of human history, we see the faith of Abel, who paid for his faith with his life. Throughout the centuries of the biblical record, this same faith is to be found in the trials of Noah, Abraham, Moses and the prophets, Jesus Christ Himself, the apostles and the members of the early Church.

A New Testament chapter, Hebrews 11, shows that for thousands of years a unity of thought was based on the principle of faith. Therefore, when reading the Bible we need to keep in mind the unity of its spiritual principles. Whether we’re studying a narrative, a hymn, an apostolic letter or the four Gospels, we find that all are connected to the same underlying principles inspired by God. If left to the devices of fallible men, the contradictions in its principles would long ago have been exposed—as they have been in most of man’s writings. Many views and interpretations about what the Bible says are contradictory. But none of these sectarian opinions affects the integrity of the Scriptures themselves.

God’s commandments are another example of a unifying principle. His laws form the backbone of Scripture, the basis for God’s relationship with mankind. They begin in Genesis, where basic principles are revealed, and are expanded throughout the rest of the Bible. In the last chapter of the final book, Revelation, we read, “Blessed are those who *do* His commandments, that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter through the gates into the city” (Revelation 22:14).

God’s commandments do not change from the beginning to the end of the Bible, even though they are amplified in the New Testament. The same author, God, inspired all of the Scriptures.

Jesus Christ mentioned the principle that Scripture is built on the framework of the command-

ments of God. He explained in Matthew 22:37-40 the two greatest scriptural and spiritual principles. One covers the First through the Fourth Commandments, and the second deals with the Fifth through the Tenth. Jesus quoted: “‘You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.” These two great principles, said Jesus, form the foundation of all of God’s laws.

Another example of biblical unity of thought is found in the genealogies listed throughout the Bible. Some think they are only a remnant of history and of little worth. Yet these genealogies, in Genesis 5 and 10 and 1 Chronicles 1 through 9, form the basis for the lineage of New Testament figures, including Jesus Christ in Matthew 1 and Luke 3.

They depict Christ not as a legendary figure, but descended from Old Testament personalities whose existence can be verified. Historical and archaeological evidence has confirmed the existence of many of Jesus’ ancestors, giving credence to the prophecies about Jesus’ descent from Abraham (Genesis 12:7; Galatians 3:16) and David (Matthew 1:1). Genealogies thus serve as historical guideposts for the existence of Jesus Christ.

Although many Bible writers lived centuries apart and didn’t necessarily realize they were writing words that would become part of Scripture, God saw to it that their writings fit with the rest of Scripture, carefully intertwined according to His will and purpose.

Yes, the Bible contains history, genealogies, poetry, letters, prophecies and symbols, but they were all inspired by the same infallible God, and each section is a part of a greater whole. Christ

## Are There Mistakes in the King James Version?

Although the original texts of the Bible were inspired by God and are without error, the same cannot be said for later copies of the texts or translations made from them. Translators are human, and many have allowed their own religious biases to influence their work. Usually such mistranslations are relatively minor, but in some cases they are major blunders and promote erroneous teachings and doctrines.

One such blatant error, made by translators of the King James Version, is found in Acts 12:4, where the word *Easter* is used. In the original Greek, this word is *pascha* and refers to Passover, not Easter. Passover is a biblical festival mentioned in Exodus 12:11; Leviticus 23:5; Matthew 26:2, 17; and elsewhere in the Scriptures. In the New Testament *pascha* is used 18 times and is translated correctly in the King James Bible as “Passover,” except in Acts 12:4, where the error was made. The New King James Version, and virtually all other translations, correct this mistake.

Another serious mistake in the King James and New King James versions is in 1 John 5:7-8. The latter part of verse 7 and first part of verse 8 did not appear in the Greek texts for the first 1,000 years after the Scriptures were completed. Around the year 500 this portion appeared in the Latin version known as the Vulgate. Apparently the insertion was an attempt to bolster the then-

controversial belief in the Trinity. The words added are as follows: “in heaven: the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit; and these three are one. And there are three that bear witness on earth.”

None of the Greek manuscripts of the New Testament up to the year 1300 contain these words. “The textual evidence is all against 1 John 5:7. Of all the Greek manuscripts, there are only two which contain it. These two manuscripts are of very late dates, one from the fourteenth or fifteenth century and the other from the sixteenth century. Both clearly show this verse to be translated from the Latin” (Neil Lightfoot, *How We Got the Bible*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1963, pp. 57-58).

Apparently monks who copied the Greek New Testament text in the 14th or 15th century added this verse from the Vulgate. Even the Catholic Jerusalem Bible admits this verse is not authentic and has left it out. Notes in the Jerusalem Bible explain that this was a marginal note in one of the copies of the Vulgate that was added to the late Greek manuscripts already mentioned. The verse from 1 John 5 should read, as hundreds of the oldest Greek texts and most modern translations read: “For there are three witnesses, the Spirit, the water, and the blood; and these three are in agreement” (New English Bible). This refers to the witness of Jesus Christ being the Son of God (verse 5).

Himself said that “the Scripture cannot be broken” (John 10:35). God does not contradict Himself.

This is one of the main reasons, in spite of countless attempts to destroy it, that the Bible is still with us after many thousands of years. It will survive as long as mankind is on earth, and it is intended for our reading and understanding. As Paul mentions: “For whatever things were written before were written for *our learning*, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope” (Romans 15:4). Christ stated that His words in the Bible would be preserved: “Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away” (Matthew 24:35).

The principle of the inspiration of the Bible

means that our beliefs must be brought in line with and conform to Scripture, which consistently conforms to its own principles. God does not make mistakes; He does not contradict Himself. We see in the Bible an intricate interweaving of God’s truths and the revelation of His plan from beginning to end.

The apostle Peter said of the inspiration of the Hebrew prophets: “Of this salvation the prophets have inquired and searched carefully, who prophesied of the grace that would come to you . . . To them it was revealed that, not to themselves, but to us they were ministering the things which now have been reported to you through those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven—things which angels desire to look

## Seven Keys to Understanding the Scriptures

Many people are unaware of several basic themes that, when understood, open our understanding of the Scriptures. Following are seven themes vital to piecing together a more-complete understanding of the Bible.

- **The true gospel:** Many people reduce the gospel to a message about Jesus Christ. It is not only about *Christ*, but about the coming Kingdom of God and how one can be a part of it. This is a powerful message of God’s government, first encompassing individuals who surrender to God and become part of His Church, to be followed by all nations and peoples in the world tomorrow.

The true gospel proclaims vital truths. It prophetically reveals events and will continue to do so until Christ returns. Be sure to request your free copy of our booklet *The Gospel of the Kingdom*, which explains this in greater detail. Please contact us at the address of your country or the country nearest you at the end of this booklet.

- **Salvation is creation:** Salvation is the goal, the culmination of God’s plan set in motion with the creation of the first man and woman. The creation was not finished with the events of Genesis 1; those occurrences were just the first physical phase of God’s creation process. God’s creation will continue far into the future.

Man was created a physical, not a spiritual, being. He is mortal, not immortal. He has the opportunity to receive God’s Spirit so that he can, by God’s power, develop spiritual character and eventually be transformed into a perfect spiritual creation. For more details, request your free copies of the booklets *What Is Your Destiny?* and *The Road to Eternal Life*.

- **The Bible’s interpretation of symbols:** Many of the prophetic truths of the Bible have been expressed by God through the use of symbols. The book of Daniel, for instance, is replete with various symbols—images and ani-

mals, some real, some fantastic, some explained, some left unexplained. Some symbols were used, not to make the meaning clearer, but to hide the message until God reveals their meaning at or near the time of the end (Daniel 12:8-9).

For centuries men have tried to interpret these symbols according to their own ideas, with chaos and confusion being the primary result. An important key to understanding biblical prophecy is that these symbols must be plainly interpreted in the Bible itself, in the immediate context or elsewhere. Strictly human interpretations are of no value. We must seek out and rely on God’s interpretation, not our own.

- **God’s dual method:** Throughout Scripture we can see the principle of duality repeatedly revealed. The physical creation in Genesis 1 leads to the spiritual creation described in Revelation 21 and 22. The first Adam, of physical matter, of the earth, prefigured the second Adam, Jesus Christ, of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 15:47-49).

Duality also appears in Bible prophecy. Sometimes there may be a preliminary fulfillment, a forerunner of a later or final fulfillment, usually at the end time.

- **God’s festivals:** God gave seven annual feasts as guideposts to remember His plan of salvation. Each one pictures a step in this process for individuals and, ultimately, for all humanity.

*Passover* pictures the death of Christ for our sins and the opportunity God gives us upon repentance to have our sins forgiven.

*The Feast of Unleavened Bread* shows that repentant people are to live spiritually clean lives after having sin’s penalty removed by the sacrifice of Christ. As the Bride of Christ, Christians are to remove sin (symbolized by leaven) and live a new life characterized by sincerity and truth.

*The Feast of Pentecost* represents the receiv-

into” (1 Peter 1:10-12). All Scripture is unified, clearly manifesting divine inspiration.

He explains further, in 2 Peter 1:20-21, that “no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.” God’s Spirit is the guiding force behind the Scriptures.

As early as Peter’s time some were already twisting parts of the Old and New Testament writings to their own folly. “Therefore, beloved,” Peter warned, “. . . be diligent to be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless; and consider that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation—as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wis-

dom given to him, has written to you, as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures” (2 Peter 3:14-16).

As quoted earlier, Paul instructed fellow minister Timothy that “all Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

At that time, before the books of the New Testament had been canonized or portions of it had

ing of God’s Spirit with which God’s people become one Church and the Body of Christ. Also known as the Feast of Firstfruits, it depicts the first harvest of those who will receive salvation according to God’s plan.

The *Feast of Trumpets* symbolizes the triumphant return of Jesus Christ to establish the Kingdom of God on earth. At the same time Christians will be given eternal life in the first resurrection.

The *Day of Atonement* represents God’s binding of Satan for 1,000 years after Christ’s return, making possible the way for mankind’s reconciliation with God.

The *Feast of Tabernacles* pictures the first 1,000 years of Christ’s reign on earth. With Satan’s destructive, deceitful influence removed, humanity can at last learn God’s ways and truth and be restored to a right relationship with God. During this time, many more will receive God’s gift of salvation.

Finally, the *Last Great Day* depicts a time after the Millennium when the dead who were not brought back to life in the first resurrection and never had a chance to receive God’s Spirit will be resurrected to live again. They will be given an opportunity, over time, to know God, understand His truths, repent and receive His Spirit. It is their opportunity to choose to become part of the Kingdom of God, to receive salvation.

For greater understanding of the significance of these God-ordained observances, request your free copies of the booklets *What Is Your Destiny?* and *God’s Holy Day Plan: The Promise of Hope for All Mankind*.

• **The truth about Israel:** Most people do not know that the ancient nation of Israel was divided into two separate territories after the death of King Solomon. The kingdom of Israel, comprised of 10 of the original 12 tribes of Israel, was taken into captivity by the Assyrian Empire and disappeared from the pages of his-

tory, becoming known as “the lost 10 tribes.”

The two tribes forming the kingdom of Judah were also taken into captivity, but largely managed to retain their identity. Some were resettled in their homeland. Today their descendants, the Jews, are spread throughout the world and the modern state of Israel.

But what happened to the missing 10 tribes? They still exist, although unaware of their biblical identity. Be sure to subscribe to and read *The Good News* for evidence of who these people are. Many prophecies will take on greater meaning and significance when we understand this vital key.

• **God’s Sabbath:** The fourth of the Ten Commandments is sometimes called the *test* commandment, and with good reason. This is the commandment that those who are only “professing” Christians will almost always refuse to obey. Obeying this command often brings on great tests of faith, requiring sincere reliance on God. But it also supplies great blessings to those who keep it. It is a vital key to understanding God’s Word, because “a good understanding have all those who *do* His commandments” (Psalm 111:10).

The Sabbath has enabled many Jews, descendants of the kingdom of Judah, to retain their identity. The “lost 10 tribes,” on the other hand, neglected and rejected God’s Sabbath, which proved to be a major factor in the loss of their true identity. To better understand this important commandment, be sure to request your free copy of the booklet *Sunset to Sunset: God’s Sabbath Rest*.

This completes some of the keys to a better understanding of God’s Word. Because traditional churches have lost so many of these seven keys, it is no wonder they have fragmented into so many denominations, each holding a different view of what the Bible says, all the while failing to understand much of its true message.

even been written, the “Scripture” to which Paul referred was the Hebrew Bible, what we commonly call the Old Testament. For several decades in the early Church, this was the only Bible extant.

Accepting only a part of the Scriptures as a basis for faith has resulted in literally hundreds of denominations with contradictory beliefs. Yet, if we do justice to what the Bible says, *all Scripture* should be respected and believed, from Genesis to Revelation. Jesus told us to live by every word of God (Matthew 4:4; Luke 4:4). We should rely on Scripture, and not man’s ideas, to explain God’s truths.

It’s one thing to view the Bible as a mere collection of stories. It’s quite another to accept it as an inspired body of unifying and related instructions, history and illustrations. The Bible is full of examples of people like us whose lives illustrate their obedience or disobedience to the principles of God.

#### Fourth key:

## Consider the Context

As with the great unifying principles, the Bible reveals another key to unlocking the meaning of the Scriptures: context. Keeping in mind the context of the examples and teachings in the Bible can help us avoid misunderstandings.

In fact, most misunderstandings of Scripture come from taking verses out of their context. Reading in context simply means to carefully consider the verses before and after the text being studied. “Out of context” means trying to understand the verses with little or no regard for the surrounding subject matter. Studying the context includes analyzing the verses within the framework of the paragraph, chapter and book, and in a larger sense the entirety of the author’s writings and the Bible as a whole.

For example, we read in Genesis 3:4 that “you will not surely die.” From this verse people could infer that man already possesses immortality, that the soul already has eternal life. But such interpretation would contradict other plain scriptures (1 Timothy 6:14-16; Romans 2:7; 1 Corinthians 15:53). Yet the context of the paragraph explains that it was Satan, in the guise of a serpent, who told this lie, saying that man would not die. The correct teaching was related by God a few verses back: “Of every tree of the garden you may freely

eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (Genesis 2:16-17).

We see that it is not enough to quote an isolated scripture; we must keep in mind its setting. In this case the point is resolved by reviewing the entire passage. We can avoid much confusion by applying this important context principle.

Sometimes only by reading whole chapters can we correctly understand the subject. For example, some quote Mark 7:18-19 to show that meats declared unfit for human consumption in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14 may now be eaten. Christ asked: “Are you thus without understanding also? Do you not perceive that whatever enters a man from the outside cannot defile him, because it does not enter his heart but his stomach, and is eliminated, thus purifying all foods?”

Yet the context of the chapter reveals the true meaning: “Then the Pharisees and scribes asked Him, ‘Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat bread *with unwashed hands?*’” (Mark 7:5).

The question was not whether particular foods should be eaten, but the *manner* in which His disciples were eating. The Pharisees were criticizing them for eating with unwashed hands. Christ answered: “For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men—the washing of pitchers and cups, and many other such things you do” (Mark 7:8).

In Matthew 15 the same incident is mentioned, but in more detail: “For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies [all are violations of the Ten Commandments and thus sin]. These are the things which defile a man, but to eat with unwashed hands *does not defile* a man” (Matthew 15:19-20).

Taking Christ’s exhortation in context, we see that all misunderstanding is cleared up. Jesus was not repealing God-given laws; He was stating that minute amounts of dirt that might be present in food will be eliminated through the body’s digestive process.

At other times it is necessary to consider the context of the book itself. A prime example is Paul’s use of the word *law* in Romans. Sometimes he used the term negatively to mean the legalistic concept of law as a means to earn salvation, which he rejected. “What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have attained to righteousness, even the righteousness of faith; but Israel, pursuing the law of righteousness, has not attained to the law of righteousness. Why? Because they did not seek it by faith, but as it were, by the works of the law” (Romans 9:30-32).

Yet in other places Paul used *law* in a positive way: “Therefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good. Has then what is good

become death to me? Certainly not!” (Romans 7:12-13). Here we see in the same book the word used in an entirely different way in a different context. It is a mistake to generalize on what the word means when taken out of its proper context. The use of this key in first viewing the context throughout the Scriptures will help avoid many wrong interpretations.

## Fifth key:

# Consider All the Scriptures on the Subject

**A**nother vital key to understanding Scripture is taking the time to look up the related verses on a subject before coming to a

conclusion. The apostle Paul set an admirable example in this regard when he taught certain truths about Jesus by referring to many passages in the Bible of his day, the Hebrew Scriptures.

“So when they had appointed him a day, many came to him at his lodging, to whom he explained and solemnly testified of the kingdom of God, persuading them concerning Jesus from both the Law of Moses and the Prophets, from morning till evening” (Acts 28:23). To prove his point, Paul carefully expounded the scriptures that dealt with Christ as the Messiah.

To properly understand a subject, all related scriptures must be taken into account. This is the principle of “comparing spiritual things with spiritual” (1 Corinthians 2:13). The *spiritual* nature of the Bible is described in Ephesians 6:17 as “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.” Various verses on the same subject can clarify biblical doctrines.

Many times, when one verse appears to contradict another, it is really only complementing the other, with each verse telling part of the story. For instance, in Luke 14:26 Jesus states, “If anyone comes to Me and does not *hate* his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple.”

## Comparing Texts: What Was Written on the Cross?

A good example of how to compare texts that complement rather than contradict each other is found in the words that Pilate, the Roman governor, wrote and placed on the stake of Jesus’ crucifixion.

Matthew 27:37 reads, “THIS IS JESUS THE KING OF THE JEWS.”

Mark 15:26 says, “THE KING OF THE JEWS.”

Luke 23:38 reads, “THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.”

John 19:19 states, “JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS.”

At first glance it might appear none of the authors copied the words on the sign properly. But, when we read each account, we find every one adds a bit more information to the rest. From John we find that Pilate did the writing. From Luke we have additional information as to why these words are different: The inscription was originally written in three languages, Greek, Latin and Hebrew (Luke 23:38). So the variations of the wording logically would have to do with the three languages used as well as the different point of view of each biographer, stressing slightly differ-

ent aspects of Christ’s life and ministry.

Adding up the wording of the different accounts, we see that the complete message recorded by the signs was “This is Jesus of Nazareth, the king of the Jews.”

None of the Gospel accounts contradicts the others; they complement each other to provide increased understanding. A helpful tool for studying Christ’s life and ministry is A.T. Robertson’s *A Harmony of the Gospels*, which provides all four Gospel accounts side by side in chronological order.

Careful use of and comparisons between commentaries and other Bible helps can usually resolve such difficulties with a little research.

In addition, should you have questions about the Bible or information published by the United Church of God, please feel free to write to us. Some of your queries may be answered by booklets such as those mentioned in this booklet or other literature. We also have personal correspondents who would be glad to help you as well. Our editorial staff is always happy to serve our readers.

This reference to hating one's family might sound strange coming from Jesus, who said on another occasion: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you" (Matthew 5:43-44).

Jesus plainly taught we should not hate anyone. How, then, can these two scriptures be explained?

We reconcile them by examining another discussion of the same subject. In Matthew 10:37 we read: "He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me." Here we find that it is not "hating" that Christ meant, but "loving less." As some scholars point out, Jesus did use the word meaning "hate," but this was apparently a figure of speech properly understood by His audience as meaning "loving less," as Matthew made clear in his account.

When we compare both passages, the contradiction disappears. We see that we can easily take one statement out of context and come up with an erroneous interpretation of it.

By using this fifth key—carefully compiling the related passages before determining what is meant on a particular subject—we can avoid confusion and error. The Bible does not contradict itself; its writers complement each other.

## Sixth key:

# Use Bible Helps Properly

Can we understand all aspects of Scripture from the Bible alone? Certainly a good grasp of the Bible is possible through applying the keys discussed earlier. However, our understanding can be enhanced by taking advantage of the work of scholars who have studied culture, language, history and archaeology as they relate to biblical events and characters.

We live 2,000 to 3,500 years removed from the time the Scriptures were originally written. The Bible's authors wrote in the languages and settings of their times. Culture and language were different from today's culture and language. Since the original languages of Scripture (Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic) are so different

from our modern languages, Bible helps are useful to enable us better to grasp the Scriptures as they were written and understood.

Paul told Timothy, "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15, New American Standard Bible). As a craftsman makes use of a tool kit, we can use proper tools to help us better understand the Bible.

Besides often quoting from the Hebrew Scriptures, on occasion the apostles quoted other sources to drive their points home. For instance, Paul used a quote from a Sicilian poet, Aratus, to convey to the Athenian philosophers a principle about God (Acts 17:28). Likewise, the apostle Jude quoted from a work called the Book of Enoch (Jude 14). Besides the Scriptures themselves, these men sometimes quoted other sources to help the brethren in their understanding of the Word of God.

What are some of the biblical tools at our disposal? Here are a few.

• **Other Bible versions:** The most helpful tool for Bible study is, not surprisingly, a Bible—or, more properly, several Bible versions, among which you can compare wording. People will often seek to find the translation that is most accurate, most literal or easiest to read. However, no single translation fits all these requirements.

More than 60 English versions of the Bible are available. We can divide them into three broad types: word-for-word, meaning-by-meaning and paraphrased. Most Bibles explain, on their introductory pages, which approach was used in preparing that particular version.

The word-for-word versions most accurately follow the Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek texts. Generally speaking, the King James Version and its modern counterpart, the New King James Version, are word-for-word translations. They are readily found in most bookstores.

How trustworthy is the King James or the New King James Bible we have available? Other manuscripts discovered since the King James Version was translated show it to be extremely reliable. For instance, when the King James Version is compared with what was found in the Dead Sea Scrolls, "the King James Bible is 98.33 percent pure" (Norman Geisler and William Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, Moody Press, Chicago, 1974, p. 263).

In the New Testament the sheer bulk of thousands of copies (4,500 Greek manuscripts) means that many minor variations among the manuscripts will be found. The King James Version, for example, is based on the majority of the authoritative Greek texts.

About 98 percent of the known Greek manu-

scripts agree with the basic text of the King James Bible. Even the variations that do exist rarely affect the basic meaning in the remaining 2 percent of those manuscripts. The preservation and transmission of the text of Scripture have been done remarkably well.

The Old Testament books are equally trustworthy. Although a few textual errors are to be found in some of the manuscripts used in translating the King James Bible, comparisons with other Bible versions can easily clarify most problems.

As an expert on textual criticism remarked, "If any book from ancient times has descended to us without substantial loss or alteration, it is the Bible. The Bible is the best-attested book from the ancient world! This has prompted Sir Frederic Kenyon to say: 'The number of manuscripts of the New Testament, of early translations from it, and of quotations from it in the oldest writers of the Church, is so large that it is practically certain that the true reading of every doubtful passage is preserved in some one or other of these ancient authorities. This can be said of no other ancient book in the world'" (Neil H. Lightfoot, *How We Got the Bible*, 1963, p. 120).

The accuracy of a version is obviously of utmost importance. Although the King James Version contains mistakes (see "Are There Mistakes in the King James Version?"), to establish sound doctrines the first choice of versions should be a more-literal edition such as the New King James Version or New American Standard Bible.

What about the meaning-to-meaning versions? They, too, can be valuable, as secondary sources, to put the Scriptures into more-understandable wording. For instance, the New King James Version of Romans 8:5-8 reads:

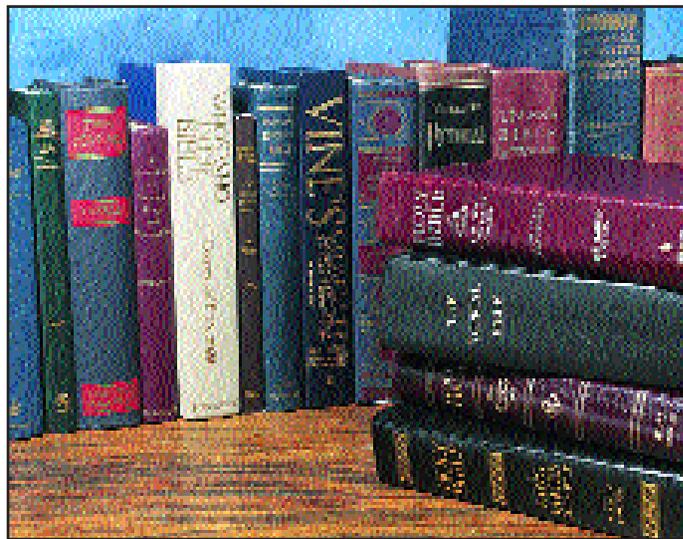
"For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God."

The New International Version, a meaning-to-meaning translation, has: "Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God."

The latter explains Paul's point more clearly for most readers, although the former is a more-

direct translation of the original language. So, when the text is not clear, many times a modern meaning-to-meaning translation can help. The Revised English Bible, Good News Bible and Jerusalem Bible are other popular meaning-to-meaning translations.

Paraphrased Bibles, such as The Living Bible, can be useful. The Living Bible can be described as an interpretive translation. Its goal is to make the Bible easily understandable. Caution is necessary in working with this text, however, because the authors exercised poetic license



to transform some basic terms according to their own religious ideas.

Paraphrased versions can be consulted to better grasp the story flow but should not be used to establish doctrine. They should be considered poor sources for accurately determining the meaning of any text.

Which version of the Bible should you buy? The King James Version, although both accurate and popular, is increasingly difficult to understand simply because the English language has evolved considerably over the nearly 400 years since its publication. The meanings of some of its words have changed over time. Many readers find the archaic language distracting and difficult to follow. Literature published by the United Church of God most often uses the New King James Version, which, while retaining much of the beauty of the original King James wording, is more readable and is still usually faithful to the original text.

Modern translations like those mentioned above are helpful for comparing and clarifying the meaning. Many people find a parallel Bible, which contains two or more versions side by side on the same pages, to be helpful.

Regardless of the Bible version you choose, it should be considered an investment in which

a little more expense up front will pay off in the long run. Consider buying a version with wide margins that will allow you to add notes from your personal study over the coming years. Although more expensive, a higher-quality leather-bound Bible will last years longer than a hardbound or paperback volume and should become a lifelong companion.

• **A concordance:** In importance, certainly the first basic Bible help is a concordance. A concordance is simply a compilation of many or all of the verses pertaining to a specific word as it is used throughout the Bible. Each word appears in alphabetical order, starting where it is first used, followed by many or all of the verses with that word in it, until its last use in the Bible.

By looking for a particular word, you can quickly locate nearly any verse in the Bible. Because it lists every use of a given word, a complete or exhaustive concordance is extremely helpful for compiling, examining and comparing all the scriptures on a given topic, enabling you to gain an overall view of nearly any subject.

The three most popular concordances are

*Strong's Exhaustive Concordance*, *Young's Analytical Concordance* and *Cruden's Complete Concordance*. *Cruden's* is smaller, less expensive and easier to use. *Strong's* and *Young's* are massive books, but give brief explanations of the original Hebrew and Greek words and so are suitable for more-detailed study. Although most concordances are compiled from the King James Version of the Bible, others based on other versions are available.

Similar tools are topical Bibles, which are indexed to subjects rather than individual words, and expository dictionaries, which offer much more detailed analysis of the original Hebrew and Greek words used in the Bible.

• **A Bible encyclopedia or dictionary:** Next in importance is a Bible encyclopedia or dictionary. This kind of reference explains a given subject or what a word meant in Bible times. Be prepared for an enormous variety, from simple one-volume editions to four-, five- and 10-volume works. For a start, a current one-volume dictionary or short encyclopedia written by conservative authors should provide good, basic

## Computer Bible Helps

We now have available a suitable substitute for cumbersome and expensive books about the Bible: Bibles and Bible helps on computer diskettes and CD-ROMs (compact discs for computers). If you have access to a personal computer equipped with a CD-ROM drive, you can make use of Bible helps that would normally cost thousands of dollars for only \$75 to \$500. Some are available free or at minimal cost through online computer services.

*Biblical Archaeological Review* periodically summarizes Bible-study software:

"The number of Bible software programs on the market has multiplied in the past couple years as computer users realize that their Macintosh or PC is the route to cheap and efficient Bible study.

"For serious students of the Bible, computer-aided text retrieval and word processing alone can justify the purchase of a computer. Remember, one \$300 Bible product on CD-ROM (a compact disc for computers) can contain enough texts and reference materials to fill more than 30,000 pages, weigh hundreds of pounds if hardbound and cost thousands of dollars. With blinding speed, a Bible study program can search its component texts (Bible translations,

original-language editions, dictionaries, commentaries and the like) and pull up every instance of every word or reference you seek" (November-December 1996, p. 58).

For example, Bible Explorer is a program on CD-ROM in Microsoft Windows format available in five editions starting at \$39.95. Its deluxe edition contains multiple Bible versions, *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance*, two Bible dictionaries, *Vine's Expository Dictionary of the Old Testament and New Testament*, *Nave's Topical Bible*, *Matthew Henry's Commentary*, Bible maps, *Thompson's Chain Reference*, five classic Bible helps and *A Treasury of Scriptural Knowledge*. More information can be obtained from Epiphany Software, (800) 280-7437.

Logos is a CD-ROM for Windows with an extensive collection of reference books. Its cost depends on the number of books included on the CD-ROM. More information can be obtained from Logos Research Systems, Inc., (800) 875-6467.

Macintosh users can buy Online Bible, with a similar number of Bible helps and more than a dozen English-language Bible versions, for less than \$100. More information can be obtained from Ken Hamel at (908) 741-4298.

The Bible and many helps are also available on the Internet.

meanings for biblical words and subjects. *New Bible Dictionary* and *Unger's Bible Dictionary* are such works.

Be aware, however, that many such works exhibit the author's bias when discussing theological issues, thus they are often not a reliable guide in doctrinal matters. Conservative authors tend to be more accurate because they tend to believe the Bible is divinely inspired and thus trust what it says. Some other authors treat the Bible only as a combination of historical and mythological ethnic literature.

• **A Bible commentary:** A commentary is another potentially valuable Bible help. It is just what the name implies: The writer comments on the verses covered in that particular volume. The contents vary greatly, from one-volume to multiple-volume works, some by one author and some by several. Keep in mind the backgrounds and biases of the authors. They can range from conservative scholars who believe in the inspiration of the Bible to theologians who regard much of Scripture as uninspired and just literature. Naturally, their comments vary considerably from those of the conservative authors and frequently contradict them.

Therefore, biblical doctrine should not be established by what these authors write in these Bible helps. Only by "comparing spiritual things with spiritual" (1 Corinthians 2:13) can true doctrine be established. We should never put men's writings on the same level as Scripture. Bible helps are just that: limited resources to *help* us understand the ancient setting of the Scriptures through geography, language, culture and history.

Many Bible versions and helps, like those listed above, are available as computer software in both floppy-diskette and CD-ROM (compact disc-read-only memory) formats. They usually include a host of additional Bible helps. Some CD-ROMs include several versions of the Bible, dictionaries, concordances, atlases and commentaries—virtually entire Bible reference libraries—at prices only a small fraction of what you would pay for the printed versions. These generally offer more-thorough and quicker study and searching abilities than are possible with traditionally printed materials.

Such software Bible helps are to be found in Bible bookstores or can be ordered through religious magazines. They save quite a bit of money and space if you have the necessary computer hardware available to you. For several years *Biblical Archaeology Review* has run an annual review and comparison of such Bible-study software programs, including full lists of features, content and pricing. These comparisons are an excellent resource if you are considering such a purchase.

This takes us to the last key to understanding the Scriptures.

## Seventh key:

# We Need the Guidance of God's Church

All the biblical keys and helps in the world are no substitute for the guidance of qualified teachers in our quest for Bible truths.

A faithful servant of God can help us tremendously to properly understand the Scriptures. As Paul asks: "And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent? As it is written: 'How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, who bring glad tidings of good things?'" (Romans 10:14-15).

Christ distinctly said He would build His Church, "and the gates of Hades [the grave, or death] shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18). He instructed His disciples: "Go therefore and make disciples [students] of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, *teaching them* to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:19-20).

What is the Church? The Bible describes it not as a building or physical organization, but as people led by God's Spirit. Fellowship with these people can help us learn these spiritual truths spoken of by Jesus Christ.

God tells us to "test all things; hold fast what is good" (1 Thessalonians 5:21). We have a part to do, but He has provided His Church, which is "the pillar and ground of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:15). He has provided faithful teachers in His Church to teach God's Word without distorting it. Paul instructed Titus: "For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders in every city as I commanded you . . . For a bishop must be blameless, as a steward of God . . . holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine both to exhort and convict those who contradict" (Titus 1:5-9).

Christ predicted that deceivers would use His name and claim to represent Him: "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits . . . Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your

name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’” (Matthew 7:15-16, 22-23).

A minister must faithfully teach and obey God’s laws. As Scripture states: “To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according



to this word, it is because there is no light in them” (Isaiah 8:20).

Therefore, once equipped with the keys God has provided us in the Bible, we need to search the Scriptures to see how they describe God’s Church and His ministers. What are some of the characteristics of His people? Here are some, but by no means all, of the ways the Bible describes them.

• **Obedient to God’s laws:** The people comprising God’s Church are described collectively as the obedient bride of Christ. “Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the

Lamb has come, and His wife [the Church] has made herself ready.’ And to her it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright, for the fine linen is the *righteous acts of the saints*” (Revelation 19:7-8). The “saints,” the people of God, are further pictured as “those who keep the *commandments of God and the faith of Jesus*” (Revelation 14:12). Those in God’s Church will be faithfully keeping God’s laws and yet rely on “the faith of Jesus” for their salvation.

• **A small flock:** God’s Church, as described in Scripture, is not a large and popular organization or denomination. Christ said of those comprising His Church, “Do not fear, *little flock*, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (Luke 12:32). They are also described as following a narrow and difficult way of life that few are willing to follow in this present evil age (Matthew 7:13-14).

The apostle James warned his readers throughout the ages not to succumb to the world’s values when its values are not in harmony with God’s commandments. “Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (James 4:4).

As a consequence of not following the ways of this world—which is in reality Satan’s world (2 Corinthians 4:4; 1 John 5:19)—the Church will ultimately be forced to flee from the persecutions of others before the return of Jesus Christ (Revelation 12:13-17).

These descriptions should help us understand how to seek and find members of God’s Church. May God help you in your quest to understand the Scriptures and, through the keys He has given, find His faithful and obedient followers.

© 1997 United Church of God, an International Association All Rights Reserved Printed in U.S.A.

Scriptures in this booklet are quoted from the New King James Version

(© 1988 Thomas Nelson, Inc., publishers) unless otherwise noted.

Author: Mario Seiglie Editorial reviewers: Scott Ashley, John Bald, Robert Boraker, Roger Foster, Jim Franks, Bruce Gore, Mark Kaplan, Paul Kieffer, John Meakin, Burk McNair, Peter Nathan, Brian Orchard, John Ross Schroeder, Richard Thompson, Leon Walker, Donald Ward, Lyle Welty, Dean Wilson

**United Church of God offices**

**Australia:**

United Church of God—Australia  
GPO Box 535,  
Brisbane, Qld. 4001, Australia  
Phone: 61 7 55 202 111  
Fax: 61 7 55 202 122  
Web site address:  
<http://www.ucg.org.au>

**Bahamas:** United Church of God  
P.O. Box N8873, Nassau, Bahamas  
Phone: (242) 324-3169  
Fax: (242) 364-5566

**Canada:** United Church of God—Canada  
Box 144 Station D  
Etobicoke, ON M9A 4X1, Canada  
Phone: (416) 231-9379, (800) 338-7779  
Fax: (416) 231-8238  
Web site address: <http://www.ucg.ca>

**South Africa:** United Church of God  
P.O. Box 4345,  
2125 Randburg, South Africa  
Phone: 011 792-4601 Fax: 011 791-0711

**Spanish-speaking areas:**

United Church of God  
P.O. Box 458, Big Sandy, TX 75755, U.S.A.  
Phone: (903) 636-4928

**United Kingdom:**

United Church of God (UK)  
P.O. Box 5929, Thatcham  
Berkshire RG19 6YX  
United Kingdom  
Phone: 01635-528063 Fax: 01635-522797

**United States:** United Church of God,

an International Association  
P.O. Box 661780  
Arcadia, CA 91066-1780  
Phone: (626) 294-0800  
Fax: (626) 294-0808  
Web site address: <http://www.ucg.org/>