“WHEN INTERPRETING SCRIPTURE”
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Introduction

Because of the confusion some seem to go through when “interpreting Scripture,” I thought I’d attempt to clarify some issues and shed some light on the matter. Essentially, the Bible contains sixty-six books, that were written by more than forty “divinely inspired” human authors (2 Tim 3: 16-17; 2 Pet 1:21) over a period of 1600 years. Some 3,500 yrs ago, God began to form His Book — the Ten Commandments were written on stone (Deut 10:4-5). Moses wrote down “what the Lord had said” (Ex 21:23; 24:4, 7). His laws were written in a book (Deut 31:24-26). Copies were made of it (Deut 17:18). Joshua added to this book (Josh 24:26). Samuel wrote in a book and laid it up before God (1 Sam 10:25). This book was known 400 hundred years later (2 Kg 22:8-20). Prophets wrote in a book (Jer 36:32; Zech 1:4; 7:7-12). Ezra read this book of God publicly (Ezra 7:6; Neh 8:5). “Thus saith the Lord” was the common preface to the utterances made by the prophets — this expression can be found hundreds of times in the Bible (1 Sam 2:27; Is 7:7; 38:1; 56:1; Jer 2:2; 6:22; 13:9; 26:2; Ezek 2:4; Amos 1:3; Mic 2:3; Na 1:12; Hg 1:2; Zech 1:3; Mal 1:6 to list a few). Though there are sixty-six books in the Bible, it is looked upon as a “single book” (biblos) with amazing continuity. The Bible declares or assumes itself to be the “Word of God” in hundreds of passages (Deut 6:6-9, 17-18; Josh 1:8; 8:32-35; 2 Sam 22:31; Ps 1:2; 19:7-11; 93:5; 119:9, 11, 18, 89-93, 97-100, 104-105, 130; Prov 30:5-6; Is 55:10-11; Mt 5:17-19; 22:29; Mk 13:31; Lk 16:17; Jn 2:22; 5:24; Acts 17:11; Rom 10:17; 1 Cor 2:13; Col 3:16; 1 Th 2:13; 2 Tim 2:15; 3:15-17; 1 Pet 1:23-25 to list a few). The constant assumption of the writers of Scripture, and Christ Himself, is that the Bible is the inerrant, inspired Word of God. Jesus Christ not only affirmed the inspiration and infallible accuracy of the Old Testament, but predicted the writing of the New Testament. According to John, the disciples were to receive truth from the Holy Spirit after Christ ascended to heaven (16:12-13). Christ said that the disciples would be witnesses to the truth (Mt 28:19; Lk 10:22-23; Jn 15:27; Acts 1:8), and He gave them authority to speak the truth (Lk 10:16; Jn 17:14, 18; Heb 2:3).

When Jesus was tempted by Satan in the wilderness, He rebuked the devil with these words — “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” (Mt 4:4). Historically, the church has echoed the teaching of Jesus by affirming that the Bible is the “Voice of God” or the “Word of God.” The Bible is called the Word of God because of its claim, believed by the church, that the human writers did not merely write their own opinions, but that their words were actually inspired by God (2 Tim 3:16; 2 Pet 1:21) — the word inspiration is a translation from the Greek word meaning “God-breathed” — God breathed out the Bible; so ultimately Scripture is God speaking… and because God is incapable of lying or inspiring falsehood (Tit 1:2; Heb 6:18; Jam 1:17; Jn 1:5), His word is altogether true and trustworthy. Therefore, since the Bible is inspired by God and its writing was superintended by Him, it cannot contain error. According to Scripture, the one supreme purpose for the Word was to reveal all God has done and will do, from the beginning of creation to the farthest reaches of eternity. Since the Bible is God’s message to man, its supreme purpose is His supreme purpose — that God might be glorified (Col 1:16; Ps 19:1; Rom 9:23; Mt 5:16; Jn 15:8; 1 Cor 10:31; 1 Pet 2:12; 4:11, 14).
God in His sovereignty chose two languages to convey divine truth: He chose Hebrew to communicate the Old Testament, and Greek to communicate the New Testament. Obviously, both languages have their own nuances and differences; as such, we can naturally assume that God chose these two languages because of their unique and diverse characteristics. The Hebrew (OT) language has the rare quality of being a “picture language;” its words paint vivid pictures; as such, it is a wonderful language for poetry, telling stories, sharing historical narrative, utilizing puns, and many other rhetorical devices. So Hebrew as a language adds color and nuances, unlike any other language, and displays vividness, conciseness, simplicity and denseness.

In comparison, the language of Greek (NT) is referred to as a “scientific language,” in that it is a very specific and technical language — as such, it is an excellent tool for vigorous thought, education, debate, argument, philosophy, logic and science, due to its strength & vigor. Because of its specificity and exactness, it takes many more English words to translate a single Greek word into English. Greek is perhaps the most precise form of expression found in any language; far beyond English, Latin, or the Oriental languages. Thus God in His sovereignty chose Greek to communicate the precise and exacting nature of divine truth.

The Language of Greek

The New Testament was actually written in something known as Koine Greek (Koine is the Greek word “common”), as opposed to Classical Greek — Koine was the common language of the people, versus the legal written language of law and commerce, as well the language of historians and philosophers. Obviously, prior to the printing press, great segments of the population were illiterate — being literate was principally the skill of the more privileged and educated in society. Though the differences between Koine and Classical Greek are not as significant as some would have you believe, the Koine dialect that was spoken by the people did differ from the Classical dialect the educated used to write; so Koine Greek had its own unique dialect. By the way, Koine Greek is much easier to learn than Classical Greek (the language of the pre-Socratic philosophers and epic historians such as Pythagorus and Hesiod).

Incidentally Greek was the spoken and written language throughout the Western world during Hellenistic times — a period of about 600 years that began with the conquests of Alexander the Great and reached to the time of Constantine the Great (roughly 300 BC to 300 AD). Hellenism is defined as the culture, language, and philosophy of life prevalent in the Graeco-Roman world during the time of Christ; though born in Greece, Hellenism was inherently international in scope and character. The noun Hellen literally means Greece. Christianity owes a great debt to Hellenism for this reason — it used the Greek language to delineate the finer points of biblical truth and the Christian faith, and to spread its message throughout the Mediterranean world. It was during the Hellenistic period that the Hebrew text of the Old Testament was translated into Greek — this popular translation became known as the Septuagint. The reason for translating the Scriptures into Greek was to make God’s Word available to the people in the vernacular in which they spoke — the majority of the Jewish people began speaking the common language of Greek following their dispersion to other lands; so it was only natural that the Jewish leaders had the Scriptures translated into that language. This unique translation was the work of “70 Jewish scholars” in the city of Alexandria (it was founded by Alexander the Great in 332 BC), which is located on the north shore of Africa. Alexandria is Egypt’s leading port today with a population of about 3 million). Why Alexandria, you ask? For more than six centuries this city was the
second city of the ancient world, surpassed only by Rome — it was known as the center of learning in pre-Christian times and during the early years of the Church, and contained the world’s largest and most famous library. Philo flourished there at the turn of the first century, as did Clement and Origen a few years later. So Alexandria later became an important seat of Christian theology as well. The word Septuagint is “seventy” in Greek — thus the Roman numerals LXX (seventy) is often found in the margins of Bibles when giving reference to it. The Septuagint actually took some fifteen years to finish (285-270 BC). So Hellenistic Greek became the language used by Greeks and non-Greeks alike, including Jews of the diaspora of pre-Christian and New Testament times, and was the common language spoken in Palestine at the beginning of the Christian era. By the way, many “Old Testament quotes” in the New Testament are actually direct quotes from the Septuagint (remember, the NT was written in Greek). It should also be remembered that the seven deacons mentioned in Acts chapter six (verse 5) belonged to the Hellenistic party, as did Saul of Tarsus… the Lord Jesus Himself in all likelihood was quite familiar with Hellenistic Greek as well.

Being as Athens was the great center of letters and arts, it was only natural that the language of Athens became the universal language of the Greek world. Since Greek was the official language of the court and the legal system of Athens, it was subsequently imported by Alexander to the conquered lands and nations of the East — thus it became the language of the Egyptians, Syrians, and Jews, as well as the Greeks who moved with the military forces and those who were merchants and educators. It was in the new cosmopolitan centers of the world, such as Alexandria, Pergamos, and Antioch that the new international language was molded. When the good news of God’s love to man began to spread, the Greek language was the tool used throughout the Roman Empire to proclaim that message — the Hellenistic ideals dominated the Mediterranean countries and beyond. It was only natural then that Greek philosophy and dialectic would contribute to the shaping of Christian doctrine and teaching (obviously under the superintendence of a sovereign God). It is also important to note that Christianity became the religion of the state in the 4th century.

Because Old Testament Hebrew and New Testament Greek are “dead languages” today — that is, they are permanently set and do not change — they are excellent tools for translation purposes because of their set meanings. Herein is another evidence of God sovereignly working out His great plan in our world — insuring that His Word would be understood by all future generations. Our English language is a “living language,” a fluid language that is always in a state of flux and change; thus mandating far greater deliberation in translation — hence the need for ongoing translations. It should be noted that most of our English translations today are superb renderings of the original Greek and Hebrew — however, in any translation, not everything that was communicated in the original language can be precisely conveyed in another language. Some nuances simply do not transfer well from one language to another (regardless of the language). As a result, a translation is not a perfect rendering of the original; hence the need for scholars and theologians to carefully study the original languages. Even with that said, however, a believer does not need to know Hebrew and Greek in order to understand the Bible, because God’s intended message for us is very well communicated in English (another wonderful language for communicating the finer points of biblical truth). Perhaps the following analogy is helpful — Reading the Bible without knowing Greek and Hebrew is like watching your average 20” Television set, while reading the Bible knowing Greek and Hebrew is like watching a 65” LED 1080p High Definition Television set with stereo surround sound. You can understand what is
going on with the 20” Television, but the 65” LED High Definition Television with stereo surround sound does give added depth and clarity. Obviously, with the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, anyone can accurately understand the Bible in English, so be careful not to make more of the language barrier than is really there.

Let’s return again to the strengths of the “Greek language” when it comes to communicating biblical truth. The Greek language, because of its specificity and exactness provides the apex in the development of biblical doctrine. The Old Testament (written in Hebrew) provides us with the vast developmental framework for the presentation of divine truth… and the New Testament (written in Greek) builds upon that foundation with ever increasing specificity and exactness. BOTH Testaments are absolutely essential — one provides the groundwork upon which to build, and the other the details of the glorious edifice itself. Biblical theologians have rightly observed that the Old Testament functions like a “giant arrow” pointing toward the New. It is also important to remember that revelation is “progressive” — that is, the Bible unfolds its message in chronological stages. Abraham, an early Old Testament saint, had less total revelation than, say, Paul, the preeminent author of some 13 or 14 New Testament books (only the book of Hebrews is in question). Because of the progressive unfolding of revelation throughout the centuries, the New Testament manifests the culmination of this teaching. So the Greek language with its fine nuances and hair-splitting accuracy, provides us with a very precise and exact understanding of divine truth — by the way, if God had wanted it to be an even an even more explicit exposition, in His sovereignty He would have designed the Greek language to include additional dynamics (it already has more than any other language!)… so what we have is an ABSOLUTELY PERFECT COMMUNICATION! God is not the author of confusion (1 Cor 14:33).

The Science of Interpretation

Any written document must be interpreted if it is to be understood. Our government has nine highly skilled individuals whose daily task it is to “interpret the Constitution” — they comprise the Supreme Court. Interpreting the Bible, however, is a far more solemn task than interpreting the Constitution… and it requires far greater care and diligence. This is where hermeneutics comes into play; literally the word means “the art or science of the interpretation of literature.” In our case, the Bible is the body of literature that we are interpreting. Most people understand that context is of paramount importance when interpreting a conversation. For example, if you overheard someone say to another person on the other end of a phone conversation, “I really hate when you do that,” you really don’t know what it is that the person hates. Perhaps if you would continue to listen in on the conversation long enough, you would pick up bits and pieces to help you understand the context in which the statement was made. All of us are well aware that without knowing the context of a conversation or discussion, we don’t have a clue as to what is really being said. The truth of the matter is, all of us practice “this art or science” every day — be it listening in on a radio discussion, or over-hearing a conversation by other people. So hermeneutics is just a fancy way of describing a set of common sense rules that we use for interpreting anything that is written. In short, the laws of logic govern biblical interpretation — we don’t just interpret the Bible according to our own desires and prejudices. It is the sport of heretics to seek support from Scripture for “false doctrines” that have no basis in the text. The basic message of the Bible is simple enough and clear enough for a child to understand, but the meat of Scripture requires careful attention and study to understand it properly (1 Cor 3:2; Heb 5:11-12; Jn 16:12).
Obviously, the books of the Bible are ancient books, and reflect social and cultural environments different from ours. In this respect they need to be explained for modern readers like any other ancient writing. To be accurate when interpreting Scripture, it is essential to study each part of a biblical document in its context, and this requires an understanding of the historical background, the original language, the type of literature represented, and the unique characteristics of the people themselves — I’ll expand more on this in the following paragraphs. When interpreting Scripture, it is important to remember that a “particular passage” was written to some individual or some group of people at a given point and time in history. As such, it is only logical to assume that the recipients of the document or writing clearly understood the background or context that the author was addressing; so it was natural that they understood the message they had received, because they were not only familiar with the situation the author was addressing, but also knew the language in which it was being communicated (their mother tongue). Both of these hurdles, however, present challenges for us today, because of our lack of familiarity with these issues.

To help modern believers understand what was going on in the New Testament church of that day, it is important that they first understand what the “context” was and the author’s reason for writing — this information must be understood before one can determine exactly what the message meant to its readers. Biblical hermeneutics can probably best be summarized by the by the apostle Paul words to his friend Timothy: “Be diligent to present yourself approved by God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth” (2 Tim 2:15). The beginner in Bible study often feels lost, because he is not yet able to grasp the Bible’s over-all point of view — as his understanding increases, however, he becomes more able to discern the unity of the biblical message, and to see the place of each part in the whole. If you are new to the Christian faith, read “Understanding the Bible” by John Stott; it’s a tremendous introduction.

Biblical hermeneutics is the science of properly interpreting the various types of literature found in the Bible — for example, a psalm should be interpreted differently than a prophecy… and a proverb should be understood and applied differently than a law… a historical narrative should be seen as something that accurately depicts an event that occurred in the past… and a letter should be seen as a piece of correspondence to a people living within a particular context at a given point in history. This is the purpose of biblical hermeneutics — to help us know how to interpret, understand, and apply the Bible. With that said, the four principle laws of biblical hermeneutics are these:

1. The first law of biblical hermeneutics is that the Bible should be interpreted literally — this means understanding the Bible in its natural, plain meaning; in short, we believe the Bible says what it means and means what it says. Many make the mistake of trying to read between the lines and come up with meanings that simply aren’t in the text (so they read into the text what is not there) — some individuals actually avoid the literal message and try to come up with an esoteric one (that’s the way the cults operate). Though there are “spiritual truths” behind the plain meaning of some passages, that does not mean every passage has a hidden spiritual truth. Biblical hermeneutics keeps us faithful to the intended meaning of Scripture, and away from allegorizing and spiritualizing what is to be literally understood. Our Lord’s literal usage of the Old Testament should serve as our standard and pattern in biblical interpretation.

2. The second law of biblical hermeneutics is that of interpreting the Bible historically — this refers to understanding the culture, background, and situation (context) which prompted the text. Essentially the Bible was written between 2,000-3,500 years ago; ignoring the historical events
of that time frequently results in misunderstanding what the Bible says. Contextual interpretation involves understanding the historical setting of a particular passage, and always taking the immediate context of a verse/passage into consideration when trying to determine its meaning.

3. The third law of biblical hermeneutics is that of interpreting the Bible grammatically — this is simply a matter of recognizing the rules of grammar and nuances of the original languages (Hebrew and Greek), and applying those principles to the understanding of the passage. Since words are vehicles of thoughts, and since the meaning of any passage must be determined by a study of its words, determining the grammatical sense of the text is essential. Furthermore, since words and sentences do not stand in isolation, the context must be studied in order to see the relationship and interconnectedness of all the thoughts that are being expressed. There are numerous sources available to the average student of Scripture to help him understand the grammatical significance of a particular word or verse or passage.

4. The fourth law of biblical hermeneutics is that of interpreting the Bible confirmationally — this is simply confirming a particular idea with other passages; the scope and significance of one passage is to be brought out by relating it to other passages. Our Lord gave an example of this when He used Gen 2:24 to show that Moses’ law of divorce was no more than a temporary concession to human hard-heartedness. So when there is a question about the true and full sense of any scripture, it must be searched out and known by other passages that speak more clearly to the issue. Therefore, when studying Scripture we must give ourselves to following out the unities, cross-references, and topical links which Scripture provides — doing so brings great clarity to the issues involved.

To sum up: It is God who desired to give man His Word… and it is God who also gave the gift of language so He could fulfill that desire. God is the author of language. Furthermore, God gave us His Word in order to communicate, not confound. As such, we should seek to understand that communication plainly, for that is the normal way beings communicate. Since the biblical languages have their own distinctive idioms and thought-forms, and each writer has his own stylistic vocabulary (as we all do)… and each book has its own character, as well as its own historical and theological background, we must be careful to interpret Scripture against that background. This does not mean that only trained scholars can study the Bible to any profit — its central message is so plainly stated in the text that the most unlearned of those who have ears to hear and eyes to see can understand it (Mt 11:15; 13:15-16). The technicalities of scholarship may be out of the ordinary Bible-reader’s reach, nevertheless every believer can, by the Holy Spirit, grasp all the main truths of God’s message. By the way, those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed, for salvation, are so clearly propounded and open to us in Scripture, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, may attain a sufficient understanding of them. J. I. Packer, in an article he wrote on “The Interpretation of Scripture,” says, “It is only over secondary matters that problems arise…. [and] what we cannot harmonize by a natural and plausible hypothesis is best left unharmonized, with a frank admission that in our present state of knowledge we do not see how these apparent discrepancies should be resolved.” An extremely encouraging note to you as a believer is this — after giving yourself to a diligent study of the Word, you will discover a bounty of previously hidden truths that will inspire and strengthen your faith in ways you never thought possible. Bible study is like “mining for gold” — every time you discover a new “nugget of truth” it brings a fresh flow of new spiritual energy into your life… and this should be a regular occurrence in every believer’s life!
Scripture tells us that if we are to understand Scripture we need, over and above right rules, *divine enlightenment* with regard to spiritual things — and no man has this by nature. The apostle Paul reminds us that “the natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him, he cannot understand them, because these things are *spiritually appraised*” (1 Cor 2:14) — in short, without spiritual enlightenment we are simply not able to understand the foolishness of God! (no pun intended). The Lord Jesus Himself confirmed this: His repeated diagnosis of the unbelieving Pharisees was that they were “blind,” lacking the capacity to perceive spiritual realities (Mt 13:13; 15:14; Lk 4:18; Jn 9:39-41; Rom 2:19; Prv 26:12); and He regarded spiritual perception as a supernatural gift from God (Mt 16:13-17). Remember, the Holy Spirit has been sent to the Church as its Teacher, to guide Christians into truth, to make them wise unto salvation, to testify to them of Christ, and to glorify Him thereby (Jn 14:16; 15:26; 16:13-14). By the way, the Spirit’s presence in your heart does not make the diligent study of the text unnecessary — the Spirit was not given to make Bible study *needless*, but to make it *effective*.

The Christian must approach the study of Scripture in “*humble dependence upon the Spirit*,” aware that he can learn nothing of spiritual significance unless God teaches him. Confidence in one’s own powers of discernment is an “effective barrier” to spiritual understanding — there is a vast chasm between human capacity and divine enlightenment; without humble dependence upon the Holy Spirit, all of our efforts at Bible study will simply be as “chaff” for the fire or “ruminations” without any spiritual substance (Eph 4:14). The Bible is more than a merely human book, and understanding it involves more than appreciating its merely human characteristics. Furthermore, God’s book does not yield up its secrets to those who will not be taught of the Spirit. Our God-given textbook is a *closed book* till our God-given Teacher opens it to us (Jn 7:17; 1 Cor 2:13-16). It’s meaning can be grasped only by those who humbly seek and gladly receive the help of the Holy Spirit. So go to Scripture prayerfully, submitting to be taught by the Holy Spirit.

**The Process of Interpretation**

Biblical interpretation is essential for a proper understanding and teaching of the Bible, and we must know the *meaning* of it before we can know how to *apply* it; as such, we must understand its sense for *then* before we can see its significance for *now*. The three questions every believer needs to ask himself when studying Scripture are these:

a. What does the passage *say*? — this is the step of *observation*

b. What does the passage *mean*? — this is the step of *interpretation*

c. How does the passage *apply to me*? — this is the step of *application*

You’ll notice, the first step is *observation* — this is the step where you examine all of the data in the passage before even thinking about interpreting it. Just as a detective studies the scene of a crime to gather clues as to what actually happened… and the scientist seeks to establish all the facts concerning a matter before he draws conclusions… so the student of Scripture needs to examine all the relevant material available to him before seeking to uncover the truth of a passage. Obviously, the more one practices the art of observation, the more proficient he becomes at it. The best kind of observation is one that is driven by “*thoughtful questions*” — all observations lead to questions. The purpose of questioning by a skilled detective is to enable him to see the relationship between each of the clues, and to seek to reconstruct the events as they actually took
place. It was the English writer **Rudyard Kipling** who gave us a profound little quotation that might well be committed to memory as a guide — it goes like this:

\[
I \text{ have six faithful friends who taught me all I know;}
\text{their names are } \text{What and Where and When and How and Why and Who.}
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The question **Where** concerns itself with the location… **When** seeks to pinpoint the temporal references in the passage… **Who** seeks to identify the individuals involved… **How** does not apply to every passage… **What** is the most frequently asked question (there are all kinds of what questions: circumstance, problem, color, tone, location, individuals involved, meaning of words, verb tenses, literary structure, etc.)… and **Why** is the most significant of all the questions (it is concerned with the reason behind the statement or action). The art of asking questions is a skill that every Bible student should be constantly developing. Someone has rightfully stated, “A questioning mind is a learning mind so long as one stands on the solid foundation of the conviction that the Bible is the infallible, inspired Word of God.” Remember, the first order of business when interpreting Scripture is to know exactly what the passage “says,” not what you think it says… or want it to say… but what it says! And this calls for a very careful examination of the entire passage. You may find it helpful to check out other translations — frequently the variations are complimentary and help reveal the whole picture. By the way, under no circumstance should a person ever build a doctrine on a “single verse” — all true doctrines must be built upon the totality of what other passages teach on the subject. To violate this principle is to invite certain error, because no passage stands alone. Cult leaders are experts in isolating passages and imposing their interpretations on them. A good topical Bible is extremely useful here — I would recommend the popular **Nave’s Topical Bible**.

To continue our discussion, it is only after determining exactly what a passage “says,” that you can determine what that passage “means.” Remember, the expert detective is the one that sees what others fail to see. To assist you in determining what a particular passage says, you want to pay close attention to the Greek and Hebrew terms — cross reference their usage in your concordance, and use **Vine’s Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words** or **Expository Dictionary of Bible Words** to further develop your understanding of the terms — both are highly recommended. It is important that believers learn to develop efficiency in their thinking and questioning, and not simply accept the views of a popular author or be swayed by the dogmatic assertions of a strong personality (Acts 17:11; 2 Tim 2:15).

Of the three steps, the step of **interpretation** is the most difficult and the most time-consuming. Cutting Bible study short in this area invariably leads to serious errors and faulty results. Sadly, some people knowingly “distort the Word of God” (2 Cor 4:2)… some distort it to their own destruction (2 Pet 3:16)… and some unknowingly come away from the Bible with a faulty interpretation — Why? Because they neglect giving adequate attention to the principles involved in understanding it rightly. The believer should be mindful of the fact that God gave him a brain to use, and foremost in its usage is that of worshiping God, discerning truth, and growing in the grace and knowledge of His Son (Mt 22:37; Rom 10:17; 12:2; Phil 4:8; 1 Pet 2:2; 2 Pet 3:18). As believers we each have a responsibility to put forth a diligent effort to know the mind of God. Unless we are truly convinced of that, however, we will just continue to play with Scripture rather than study it. It should also be noted that studying the Bible without proper hermeneutical guidelines, can lead to confusion & interpretations that are even in direct conflict with the clear teaching of Scripture.
By the way, with all of the Bible study helps that are available to the believer today (Concordances, Lexicons, Bible Dictionaries, books on Theology & Commentaries; though commentaries introduce us to professional opinions that can be invaluable, we should still never assume that they are always right), there is really very little excuse for any of us not to have a very solid understanding of Scripture and the Christian faith. It is simply a matter of taking the time to study. Obviously if we neglect to study the Word, we will simply remain shallow in our theological understanding (Acts 17:11; 2 Tim 2:15)... and the result of a shallow theology is a shallow faith and a unfruitful life. The reason we study is not just a cerebral exercise, but the application of Scripture (living a godly, fruitful life); that is actually mankind’s purpose for existence (Jn 15:5, 8). To not apply the Word, then, is like getting a prescription from your doctor for an illness that you have, and then going home and simply placing the medicine on your nightstand... without ever taking the medicine! Why on earth would a person do that? Either that person is not convinced of the significance of his illness, or he doesn’t have any confidence in the medicine... or he’s got a problem above the neck.

Theology deals with the ultimate questions of life — essentially, it is God’s perspective on life. Many Christians go through life thinking, “they don’t need to know about theology.” But the truth of the matter is, every one of us has a theology... we all have a set of beliefs about God, but we do not all have a properly informed theology. Most people have an opinion about what has gone wrong with humanity, and we all have some thoughts about God, who Jesus is, and the topics of heaven and hell... but not all of our opinions are equally informed and valid. By the way, Scripture warns us that “doctrinal disagreements” are inevitable within the church (1 Corinth 1:19); not all people will agree with the proper interpretation of God’s word, sometimes even on very critical issues. Important Creeds developed in the first few hundred years of the church to combat heresy and controversy. The church crafted the Nicene Creed in specific response to the false teaching of Arius of Alexandria, who denied the true deity of Christ. Athanasius, that great war horse of the faith, understood well the issues at stake. If the Arian view of Christ would have held sway, the church would be worshipping a mere creature today — thus transmuting the Christian faith into just another species of paganism. The Arian Jesus was “another Jesus;” thus it proclaimed “another gospel.” And so the church produced the Nicene Creed, which declared that Jesus is fully God, of the same substance (homoousios) as the Father. Why didn’t they just “quote” the Bible? Well, they did... but so did the Arians! And therein lay the problem — the Arians quoted Scripture to “prove” that Jesus was a created being, drawing precisely upon such verses as John 3:16 — according to them, the expression “only begotten” meant “created;” thus concluding that Jesus was a creature and therefore not God by nature. Isn’t it amazing how the enemy prostitutes Scripture? And as far as Jesus being called “God” in such passages as John 1:1, they actually claimed to agree with this! But what they meant by it is that Jesus did “God-like things,” such as ruling, reigning, judging, etc. It is no different, they maintained, from the Judges of Israel, who similarly were called “gods” (Ps 82:6). Certainly they were not “gods” by nature, but they did exercise a certain divinely sanctioned authority, even as Jesus does. So, like them, they maintained that Jesus also can be called “god,” but only in a figurative manner of speaking. Therefore for the church to simply parrot back the same verses to the Arians wasn’t sufficient. Instead, it was necessary for the church to say what the Bible means when it says that Jesus is “only begotten” (monogenes) or that Jesus is “God” (theos). And that is exactly what the Nicene Creed does in its affirmation that Jesus is “begotten, not made” and “of one substance (homoousios) with the Father.”
The “rule of faith” is more popularly known as the *Apostles’ Creed* — typically, it served the function of allowing the candidate to confess his or her faith on the occasion of baptism… and was used for the regulation of teachers and clergy in the church. Conversely, we also *sing* our theology in the form of hymns… we don’t just recite them. Singing hymns drives their meaning deeper into the heart… it penetrates the soul at a more profound level. The poetry that forms the lyrics of a hymn combines with the music to have a multiplied effect. Obviously, God must agree, because the Bible itself contains a book of Psalms; a collection of writings that comprises the most beautiful lyrical poetry set to music ever written. We should remember, however, that error can also gain potency by being presented in attractive dress — Arius of Alexandria spread his heresy through poetry and song. I am reminded of the words Frank Sinatra’s popular song, “I did it my way!” That is the proud motto of the self-made man! Though its message runs completely contrary to Scripture, it is now one of our nation’s “supreme values!” And then there is our “National Anthem” and “Pledge of Allegiance” — regrettably, we really no longer truly believe their assertions. Back in the day when “reading” was an art form that the majority had not yet mastered, most people learned concepts by “memorizing” — they memorized hundreds of songs, poetry, creeds, acrostic lists, etc. Once a particular text was memorized, the student would then be instructed on the meanings of the various words and other related concepts. It is really a very effective learning method. For example, take our “Pledge of Allegiance” — imagine being taught the significance of “every single word” in that pledge (say the pledge out loud so that you can appreciate the methodology); obviously, that would greatly enhance one’s understanding of it. As it is, most Americans can’t even define the terms, let alone understand them! And we call ourselves “educated!” Conversely, most Christians like to think of themselves as being fairly educated on spiritual matters, but their theologies are frequently all over the map. The problem? They simply don’t take the time to diligently study the Word!

In closing, let me encourage you to actually “study” one of the following passages from John’s gospel — John 1:1-18… John 3:1-21… John 4:7-26… or John 5:1-17 — choose just one of these passages. Read them all first and then choose one! And be as diligent as you possibly can be… even if it takes you a month to study it! And whatever you do, study it with a pen and a yellow pad… do all your homework… ask every question you can think of (verse by verse by verse)… and ask the Holy Spirit to open your heart to the truths of God’s Word. The resultant effect upon your heart and mind and faith will astound you! Never again will you question the validity of diligent Bible study (or your ability to do it!), because the discovery of “new truths” will bring a fresh infusion of spiritual energy into your life! God will bless you for digging into His Word! That’s the testimony of Scripture! (Jer 15:16; Ezek 3:3; Ps 119:103; Jam 4:8). Some of you have become so accustomed to swimming in six inches of water spiritually, that you never thought it was possible for you to get away from the shore line and swim in water over your head. After you experience greater depths in your studies, you will wonder why you never tried it before! The reason you didn’t? — Satan simply did everything he could to keep you in shallow water close to shore, where the vast majority of believers reside! I can’t say this too strongly — swimming in deep water will be a life-transforming experience for you! Yet we all know it won’t happen unless YOU ARE DETERMINED TO MAKE IT HAPPEN! Don’t settle for wading by the shoreline! (Heb 4:12; 6:1; 1 Cor 3:2; 1 Pet 2:2). Read this entire study two or three times and then get started studying one of the studies. By the way, I have written a commentary on the Gospel of John — you can find it on my website at: TheTransformedSoul.com — you may want to refer to it at various points in your study… but don’t make it “the end all” in your study… only use it as “one of the many tools” that you use! Let me remind you of the following truth —
“Faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ” — Rom 10:17

“A man who is well grounded in the testimonies of the Scriptures is the bulwark of the Church.” — St. Jerome (340-420)

“The minister who is a faithful interpreter of the Word continues to exercise considerable authority because of the actual power of the Bible.” — H. Richard Niebuhr

“The office of a commentator is to set forth not what he would prefer but what his author says.” — St. Jerome (340-420)

“The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose” — William Shakespeare