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Over the past few years, I have received numerous phone calls and emails from brethren confused about passages of scripture or teachings they have heard. Many times their call is prompted by a crisis in faith. They had believed a teaching which was not true, and had now come to the realization that it was error. They are shaken and confused. But instead of allowing this to destroy their faith or to bring doubt about everything they have been taught, they seek help.

I am glad when someone in this situation takes time to write or call, since it means the person is looking for God's truth. To me, a hunger for truth is the chief requirement for spiritual growth and maturity. Instead of telling them what I believe concerning their dilemma, I help them examine the scripture to find the answers they need. Being guided in their own Scripture search to find the answer, they not only know their answer is correct but hopefully they will also have learned how to find other answers when needed.

Unfortunately most people have not been trained how to find answers. They listen to others and have little idea how to discern who is correct and who is teaching error. Unless they are taught how to study, understand and discern truth, their only hope is to diligently study, whilst guarding their heart; studying with the attitude that they will not accept anything as true unless they have confirmed it through their own studies.

This is the reason we are developing a series on *"How to read and understand the Bible."* Recently, Yai and I traveled through Mid America, conducting pilot workshops for this course. Our goal was to teach each group of people how to find correct answers to their questions.

These workshops are interactive, requiring participation from all who attend. Instead of learning various theories of interpretation and then trying to apply them, participants work through the process of discovery. They are guided step by step to their own conclusions. Although this method takes longer than traditional methods of teaching, the results are far superior. People learn better by doing and than by listening; participation and experience are better teachers than rote memorization.

We taught the workshop and seminar (in full or in part) ten times with groups from a broad variety of ethnic, cultural, and doctrinal backgrounds. (White, Black, Native American Indian, Lutheran, Evangelical, Charismatic, Pentecostal, etc.) Each seminar and workshop was uniquely different. In each class, people raised different questions, and showed interest in different topics. When they asked a question, we would go to clear passages which were directly related to it, and study them together as a group.

Because the background of each group was different, it was difficult to know in advance the questions the group would ask. Thankfully the Lord prepared us. Prior to going to each place, Yai and I would pray, asking the Lord which passages we should ready for use. I thank the Lord that He has given Yai great wisdom and insight. As we prepared to conduct each workshop, Yai would do an analysis of the upcoming group. She was able to anticipate what the class dynamics would be, and which questions and topics would come up. Although I usually disagreed with her assessment and could not imagine why the people would ask those questions, I trusted her, and we would prepare answers for those questions. Each time she was correct. Because of this we were able to use Scripture to not only answer to their questions, but use their questions to introduce and teach additional skills they would need to find their own answers.

Outcome & Feedback

The response was overwhelming. The Lord used these classes to give people keys they needed to unlock their understanding of Scripture. As people studied and reached their own conclusions, they had a real sense of accomplishment. Not only were they able to find the correct meaning of a passage but now *they knew how to find it*. What a joy it is to look out across a group of people and see the expressions on their faces as they suddenly understand a passage.

It is exciting to see how God used this teaching. Already people are telling us that they find reading and understanding the Scripture much easier. Their studies are now filled with understanding and confidence instead of confusion and doubt.

One teacher that attended told us how this course transformed the way he teaches Scripture. He told us that two weeks later he was using the same techniques and principles we had used to teach his people. Another told us how he had desperately wanted to come but was scheduled to teach. Just in time the way opened for him to come; there had been a scheduling mix up and another teacher was also scheduled at that same time. Like a sponge soaking

up water, he hungrily asked question after question.

At another seminar the air conditioner was not working. The pastor told us that he had called someone from his congregation to come look at it. During lunch a man told us that the things we were teaching had been exactly what he needed to hear. He was excited. He told us that the examples we had used in class were the same Scriptures he and his wife had been studying but did not understand.

God had used this seminar to show him the passage's true meaning. The man confessed that he had not originally intended to attend our seminar, but had come to fix the air conditioning. However, after hearing us teach, he sat down and listened. The Lord had used the broken air conditioning to bring him there, answer his questions, and at the same time teach him how to study and understand the Bible.

Many of those who attended the classes wanted us to teach them more. Some groups have already requested that we return next year. We are considering returning to the United States in 2010 with an expanded course.

Finding the True Meaning of a Passage

In the first workshop people learn how to find the correct meaning of any passage. We begin by reading passages of scripture we know will interest them, then asking them to tell us the different ways they have heard these passages used, listing the most common interpretations.

We then lead the group to find their true meaning. We have them read the passages again, but this time, include the text which immediately precedes and follows each passage. As they do, we ask questions designed to systematically dissect and analyze the text. Soon the correct meaning of each passage becomes clear.

The Bible was not written verse by verse. Like most other writings, it was written paragraph by paragraph, one topic flowing into another. When we attempt to interpret a verse of scripture without looking at the paragraph or topic being discussed, we will almost always interpret it wrong. The separation of the Bible's text into chapter and verse that we have today, was first published in the Geneva Bible in 1560 A.D.

As they quickly and easily find the true meaning of several other passages, the group discovers that ***the primary way to find the true meaning of most passages is simply to study the passages surrounding it***. They realize that if the passages which follow a verse are discussing the same subject as the passages which precedes it, then the verse must in some way be related to that subject. This is known as studying its context. By having people actually use the principles of contextual analysis before we explain them, they find them much easier to understand and remember how to use.

After studying passages which are easily and clearly understood by reading their context, we have the class study more difficult passages. They are ones that although the subject of the passage is easily defined by studying its context, the passage's full meaning eludes us or it is not quite clear. To find the meaning of these passages we have the group read and study parallel passages, (*When the Bible describes another account of the same event, teaching, promise, or instruction, these are called parallel passages*) and what the same writer says about that topic elsewhere. As we study these other passages, the group begins

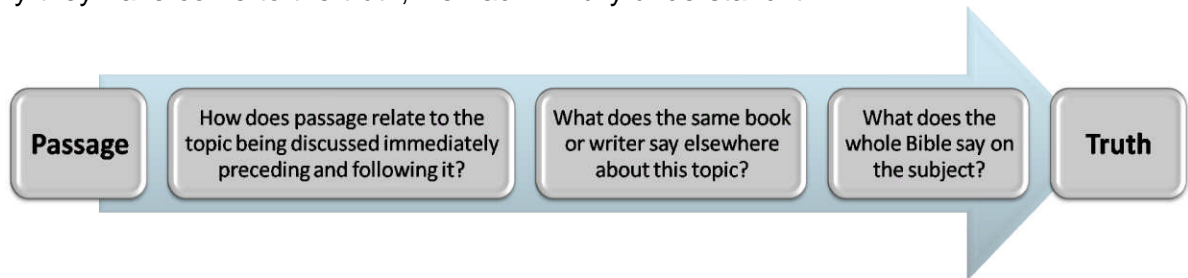
to fully understand the consistency of Scripture. They realize that God wrote the Bible so that everything wove together to be an intricate and complete book which never contradicts itself and can be used to know and understand any questions we have about Godly life. God did not say one thing at one time, then change and say another thing at another time.

Passage after passage the group uses other scriptures to find the correct meaning of the one in question. As they do, they begin to fully understand the principle that unclear passages can only be interpreted or correctly understood by comparing them to clear passages on the same topic. They have learned how to use Scripture to interpret Scripture.

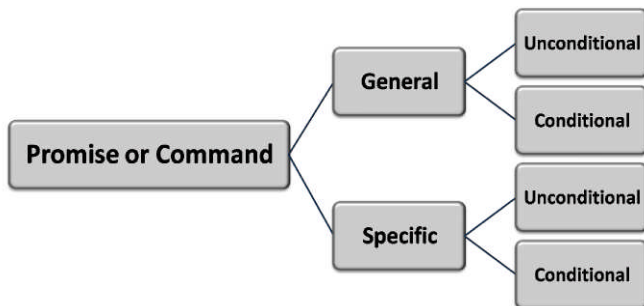
Finally, to verify they have come to the truth, we had

the group compare and test their findings to what the rest of scripture says by studying what other Biblical writers said on the same topic. The groups verified their findings, they had reached the right conclusions. As they did they also obtained a better, more comprehensive understanding of the topic, realizing there was more to each topic than they had originally found.

By examining a topic using the whole Scripture, the group learned that there are no stand-alone passages, isolated without support from the rest of Scripture. In order to have a complete and thorough understanding of any topic they cannot base their understanding solely on one passage. No matter how clear a passage may seem, they need to study the rest of Scripture to fully understand it.



Understanding God's Promises & Commands



All promises and commands in the Bible are either general (*which apply to everyone at all times*) or specific (*which apply to a specific people, situation, place or time.*) When God gives a promise He often links it to requirements that must be kept and conditions which must be met before He will keep that promise. The same is true for commands; not all commands and instructions apply to everyone. Some were given only to a limited number of people, for a specific time, or place.

Most misunderstandings and misinterpretations of Scripture, stem from two primary causes. The first, which people learn to avoid in the first segment of the "How to Read and Understand the Bible Seminar & Workshop," occurs when people do not understand the topic and take the passage out of context.

The second occurs from applying scriptures incorrectly. This is especially true of God's promises and commands. Because so many people in churches today do not understand or misapply the Lord's promises and commands, they gather in prayer to ask God to keep promises that He never promised them; then feel disheartened and confused when He does not answer the way they expect. In the second segment of the seminar the group learns to avoid this by learning how to analyze the promises and commands God made in the Bible.

Always look to see who the promise or command, applies to, and under what conditions.



The group learned how to study the Scripture to know if a command or promise was for us, or was limited to a specific people, place, time or condition. God is never ambiguous. When He gives a promise, it is clear to whom it applies and under which conditions. The same is true for His commands. When God instructs us to do something, He clearly states it. If we search, we will find that the Bible makes clear who was to be the recipient of each and every promise and command God made.

We used questions and answers to lead the people

through an examination of scriptural promises and commands. By carefully studying the text, they were able to determine when they apply, under what conditions, and to which group of people (the Israelites, the disciples, all believers everywhere, or mankind in general.) The group studied many of God's promises to determine which ones are for today and apply to us. They found that many of the promises (or commands) that they were claiming for themselves do not apply to Christians today, and many others apply but have conditions for fulfillment that had not been understood.

"If My People . . ." 2 Chronicles 7:14

The promise which evoked the strongest response from participants was 2 Chronicles 7:14; *"if My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land."*

Recently, this promise has become popular with Christians going through economic problems. Some believe this to mean that when Christians come together in earnest prayer on behalf of their nation, God will take away its problems, 'heal the land,' and bless the nation. They gather in groups claiming this promise, asking God to heal their land. As economic hardships continue they begin wondering why God is not keeping His promise? Why isn't God 'healing the land?'

Most misunderstandings of commands or promises, come either from taking passages out of context, or not understanding the conditions, requirements and limitations God put on them. In the case of 2 Chronicles 7:14, both of these apply. To understand

this promise we must first know the context in which it was given and the conditions God required to be met before He would honor it.

The group discovered that 2 Chronicles 7:14, is not a general promise made to believers that they can gather in groups for prayer and bring blessing to their land. When they studied the context, they quickly realized that this verse is only one sentence which is part of a specific response God gave when King Solomon prayed at the dedication of the temple. [Read Solomon's prayer in 2 Chronicles 6:14-42 and 1 Kings 8:22-53]

Solomon knew that the Lord's blessing on the Promise Land had always been contingent with Israel's obedience. So he made a specific request to God that when the people returned to God, humbled themselves, turned from their wicked ways, came to the temple and offered prayers of repentance that the Lord would honor those prayers and lift any curse He had placed on them or the land.

The Promise: 2 Chronicles 7:12-22; 1 Kings 9:1-9

In the time of Moses, God had promised Israel that He would bless the Promise Land, as long as the people followed God and obeyed His commandments. God had also promised to curse the people and the land if they did not obey His commands or followed other gods. (*Deuteronomy 4:39,40; 6:1-3; 11:8-17; and chapter 28*)

God's promise linked Solomon and the temple into the same promises of blessings and curses that He had given Israel when they had entered the promise land. But now God added additional blessings and curses. His promise is recorded in 2 Chronicles 7:12-22, and also 1 Kings 9:1-9. To fully understand God's promise and all of its conditions, we must study both passages.

God's promise can be separated into three parts.

1. God would hear prayers offered in the temple, take away any curses and heal the land, whenever the people turned from doing evil and came back to God.

2 Chronicles 7:12-22

Promise Concerning the Temple

¹² Then the LORD appeared to Solomon by night, and said to him: "I have heard your prayer, and have chosen this place for Myself as a house of sacrifice. ¹³ When I shut up heaven and there is no rain, or command the locusts to devour the land, or send pestilence among My people, ¹⁴ if My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land. ¹⁵ Now My eyes will be open and My ears attentive to prayer made in this place."

2. If Solomon followed God and obeyed His commands he would always have an heir on the throne of Israel.

Promised Blessing to Solomon for Faithfulness

¹⁷ "As for you, if you walk before Me as your father David walked, and do according to all that I have commanded you, and if you keep My statutes and My judgments, ¹⁸ then I will establish the throne of your kingdom, as I covenanted with David your father, saying, 'You shall not fail to have a man as ruler in Israel.'"

3. If King Solomon, (or his descendants - 1Kings 9:6) turned away from the Lord, to serve other gods, He would remove Israel from the land and destroy the temple so that people everywhere would always remember that God did this because Israel refused to serve Him.

Promised Curse for Unfaithfulness

¹⁹ "But if you turn away and forsake My statutes and My commandments which I have set before you, and go and serve other gods, and worship them, ²⁰ then I will uproot them from My land which I have given them; and this house which I have sanctified for My name I will cast out of My sight, and will make it a proverb and a byword among all peoples. ²¹ And as for this house, which is exalted, everyone who passes by it will be astonished and say, 'Why has the LORD done thus to this land and this house?' ²² Then they will answer, 'Because they forsook the LORD God of their fathers, who brought them out of the land of Egypt, and embraced other gods, and worshiped them and served them; therefore He has brought all this calamity on them.'"

The Lord Kept His Promise.

Solomon lived another 30 years after the dedication of the temple. He did not stay faithful to the Lord and began worshiping idols. Therefore after he died, God split the kingdom giving ten tribes to Jeroboam, Solomon's servant, (called the Kingdom of Israel or the Northern Kingdom, its capital city was Samaria) and left Solomon's son the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, (known as the Southern Kingdom or Judah its capital city was Jerusalem.)

and return to God, but they would not. Finally He removed them from the Promised Land and destroyed the temple.

From the beginning the Northern Kingdom of Israel rebelled against the Lord worshiped false gods. For years God warned them but they never repented and returned to God. After 208 years the Lord had Assyria destroy them and take its people as slaves.

For many generations God sent prophets to both Judah and Israel warning them, calling them to repent

The Lord sent numerous prophets to warn Judah to put away their idols and return to God. Occasionally

they did repent and return to God, but never fully purged the land of idols. After 342 years God kept His promise and had Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, destroy Judah, Jerusalem, the temple, and carrying their people captive into Babylon, ending the reign of David's heirs.

After 70 years of captivity in Babylon, God brought Judah back to Jerusalem and commissioned the rebuilding of the temple. But **even though God's people had returned to the land and rebuilt the temple, God never renewed or made a similar promise to bless the temple or the land.** The old promise was finished, it had been fulfilled, and did not apply to the new temple.

Participants learned several lessons from this workshop. One of the most important was that God's word is absolute. God keeps His promises. By studying they learned that the promise had ended, and did not even apply to God's people Israel after they returned from exile and rebuilt the temple. From this they also realized that this promise was not given nor applies to Christians. Most importantly they learned that we cannot claim any promise from the Bible simply because we want it to apply to us. God is the one who determines who it applies to.

However even though 2 Chronicles 7:12-22 does not apply to us we are not without hope. God is merciful. When we search in the Bible, we find that God gives other promises of blessings. However, like God's promise to Solomon those promises have conditions which also need to be met.

For instance, God clearly states in Jeremiah 18:7-10 that He will relieve His curse when a nation repents, turns from sin and follows God. He also promises to take away His blessing if they become disobedient. [See also Ezekiel 33:13] The only way the Lord will

remove a curse He has placed on anyone or any nation, is for them to repent, turn from their evil ways, and obey God's commands.

Jeremiah 18:7-10

⁷ "The instant I speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, to pull down, and to destroy it, ⁸ if that nation against whom I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I thought to bring upon it. ⁹ And the instant I speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to build and to plant it, ¹⁰ if it does evil in My sight so that it does not obey My voice, then I will relent concerning the good with which I said I would benefit it.

The Book of Jonah is a good example of this. God had pronounced judgment on the nation of Assyria. God sent His prophet Jonah to Nineveh (their capital city) to tell them of their coming judgment. Jonah rebelled against God's command, but God made him go anyway. Jonah preached the coming judgment. But Nineveh repented and God relented and removed the curse on Nineveh. *Then God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it.* Jonah 3:10

Understanding God's promises and commands transformed the faith of many of those who took this class. Several had become disillusioned and lost heart because they had been claiming promises, or following commands that the Lord never intended for them. Now they know how to determine which promises are for them and which commands to follow, and have received renewed confidence based on knowing truth.

I pray for everyone who reads this newsletter; "May the Lord use this teaching to give you a better, more comprehensive understanding of His words. And may those who have become disillusioned and lost heart receive renewed confidence based on knowing His truth. Amen"

In Christ

Doug Heil

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