

13th December 2020 10 am Interpreting Scripture Properly

Service led by Andrew Attwood, Talk by Phil Swards,

Andrew also interviews Rob Harris about his approach to memorising Scripture

Greetings and Notices.....	1
Lighting the Candle.....	2
Interview: Memorising Passages in the Bible.....	2
1 st Song: So Will I (a 100 billion times).....	5
2 nd Song: We Bow Down.....	6
Reading: 2 Timothy 4:1-4 [NIVUK].....	6
Talk.....	6
Prayerful response.....	12
Intercessions.....	12
Blessing.....	14
3 rd Song: The Potter's Hand.....	14

Greetings and Notices

[Andrew Attwood:] Good morning.

[Rob Harris:] Good morning.

[Andrew:] Great to see you Rob! Good morning to everyone who's watching. Good to have you with us. And good morning to Phil too: good to have you with us, Phil.

[Phil:] Good morning, yes, good to see you.

[Andrew:] And I don't know about you but I was feeling that music was making me think of a kind of a Des O'Connor kind of Christmas special or something like that. Are you guys kind of getting into the kind of Christmas spirit yet? Are you full of anticipation for Christmas yet?

[Rob Harris:] I certainly am at the moment. My kids are getting very excited and as we get closer it's getting very exciting.

[Andrew:] What about you Phil?

[Phil:] I can't believe it's the third Sunday in Advent already. I mean I put October and November down in the same in a safe place, and somebody's stolen them, so all of a sudden we're in the middle of... I can't quite believe it, but it's a great time of year and, obviously, the anticipation of Christmas is excellent.

[Andrew:] Well, it's really good. I won't mention the unmentionable, have we bought things for our wives yet? Let's not go there. Anyway, I'll see you guys later and we'll, we'll catch up with you in a short while. Good to see you.

But it's nice to see everyone again this morning, as Phil mentioned, third Sunday in Advent, as we get closer to the Christmas, Christmas Day. Just a few notices to set the scene for us this morning.

- As usual, you would have had emailed out with the newsletter various activities for children and adults. So do make use of those because they're going to be tied into the theme of today's service.
- With regards to the plans as we move towards Christmas there is going to be an online carol service at 6pm on the 20th of December. So do make a point of tuning in on this YouTube channel for the carol service at 6pm on the 20th.
- I also wanted to mention that there has been distributed an online Christingle service that the local diocese has put together. If you haven't got a link for that already, families, do make a point of emailing Denise. I think you'd be able to find it on the various WhatsApp groups as well. That's just because we can't gather lots of families and young children all together at this time as you know, but there's an online Christingle service that might work in your home as a family, so that's something for you to consider.
- The two in-person services that are going to be happening in our building, as we've already said, are going to be on Wednesday 23rd, the midweek Christmas service, that's the morning 10:30 service, but also there's

going to be an 8am Christmas Day service in the building. I do want to emphasise those are in the main reserved for people who would normally be going to those services, because we have to have limited capacity at the moment. So hold off from turning up in droves to those things, but that's just to let you know what is happening physically.

- I also wanted to make a reminder to you, just like I think Lindsey mentioned last week, we're trying quite hard to encourage people to connect to neighbours on this unusual Christmas. We're going to be doing some Christmas carols Friday, Saturday this coming week in our street, and there's opportunities around Christmas time and even around New Year if you haven't planned anything for Christmas yet. Why don't you do something that would make an opportunity for conversations with neighbours, because a lot of people are going to be staying at home. So that's something for you to consider, connecting to neighbours this Christmas.

Lighting the Candle

If you could get your Bibles out for later, the Bible reading is going to be 2 Timothy chapter 4, verses 1 to 4 and keep your finger in there for later when we have the reading. But for now I just wanted to get us into a place where we can focus on God. So I'm going to light the third Advent candle.

So let's pray, maybe close your eyes if that's a help to you. Let's pray, and let's remember anticipation.

Father God, would You prepare our hearts in anticipation of Your coming?

So just as we're still, remember that there is a double anticipation for Christians every Christmas. There is the remembering of the first coming of Christ. And we enter into the excitement of the story that we know. And so as Christians, again we say,

Come, Lord Jesus. We welcome You. Come Lord Jesus. We welcome You.

But we also expect and look forward to the second coming of Jesus Christ, the return of Christ, at the end of this age, which will be beyond any imagining. And so once again, set your mind, as best as you can, to imagine His Second Coming, His return, a second Advent.

Come, Lord Jesus. Come quickly.

So just maybe a few minutes, a few moments of quiet as we prepare our hearts in the presence of Christ, who comes.

So, Lord Jesus, would You soften our hearts, would You give us teachable hearts, teachable minds this morning, so that we can learn more of You, and grow in relationship with You.

In Jesus' Name we pray, Amen.

Interview: Memorising Passages in the Bible

[Andrew:] Okay, I want to have a brief conversation with Rob now. Rob has kindly offered to be interviewed this morning. Good to see you again, Rob. Rob, one of the things that fascinated me is your appetite to learn Scripture. What was it in the beginning that made you want to learn Scripture by heart?

[Rob:] Well I guess it would be fair to say I'm at the very start of my journey, but I think it was born out of a frustration of being in Bible studies or conversations and kind-of remembering a verse, but maybe not remembering it fully or not remembering where it was in the Bible. And so I wanted to try and you know, somehow reinforce that within myself.

[Andrew:] Okay. And so what kind of things have you been doing to help you learn or retain passages that. What have you been doing?

[Rob:] Well, so, I guess, as I started on this journey I remembered Psalms 1:2, where it talks about as being being delighted in the Law of the Lord and meditating on it day and night, so I thought okay, I need to get some kind of system in place where I can start doing this meditation. And I thought I wanted something that I would enjoy for my entire life as well. So I thought I'd take you through an example of a single verse, and the approach that I've used for it.

[Andrew:] Go for it, go for it.

[Rob:] So if we look at something really helpful like Romans 10:17, so "**Faith comes by hearing and hearing through the word of Christ.**" If you've got it memorised in your head, it's really easy to hear, there's essentially four things that we need to try and somehow remember, if we commit this to heart: the book, the chapter number, the verse, and of course the verse text. And what I decided to do was see if I could create some sort of system that would make this an easier journey to go on, as opposed to just trying to learn off by heart through rote etc. So I came up with an approach where I create:

- a character to represent each book in the Bible,
- an object to represent each chapter number,
- and a location to represent the verse number,
- and I mix all of these things together to create a story.

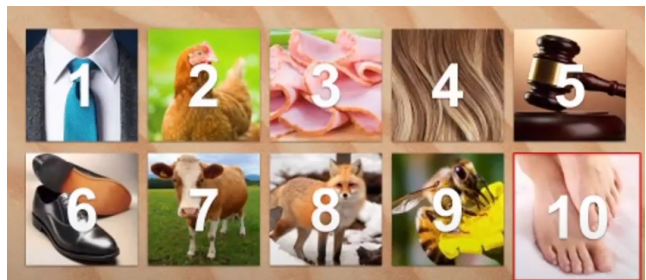
So in terms of the book and the characters, well, I'm definitely into my films as my wife and children would say, so I decided to get a whole bunch of film or TV characters to represent different books of the Bible, so there you can see,

- Matt Damon represents Matthew for me
- and Harry Potter with a mark in his forehead represents Mark,
- and some slightly more obscure ones like Numbers, well I went for Albert Einstein for that,
- or Proverbs: Yoda from Star Wars,

and where you have things like a lot of books in the Bible where we have like one and two of the book,

- so 1 Chronicles and 2 Chronicles, of course I thought The Chronicles of Narnia, so Aslan for 1 Chronicles and the White Witch for number 2.
- For Romans, it's not particularly hard: imagine a Roman soldier. And so I have a person or a character, if you like, that represents the book of Romans.

The next bit is a little bit more tricky. So there's actually a well-known mnemonic system for converting numbers into objects, and it's all based on the sounds of words: you convert a number to consonant sounds, and then you find a word that matches those sounds. And so for me, I've created 100 different objects to represent the numbers one to 100. So a tie represents number one, hen represents number two, and so on and so forth. Now it just so happens that toes represents the number 10.



So I've got Romans for the book, and toes for the chapter 10. The third element, to remember the verse number, is where I create what's called a memory palace. Now a memory palace can be anything, any location that you're familiar with: it could be your house, it

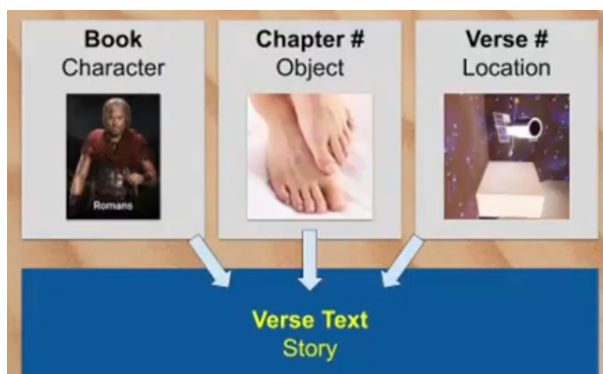


could be a walk around the park, could be a business trip that you go on, but because when you memorise Scripture you want to be able to remember the order of the verses: verse one, verse two, verse three, verse four. So you convert that to a path that you walk around and you put your memory aid at each location in the path. Because I want this to be something endures over my lifetime, I may move houses, parks may be torn down or whatnot, I decided to create a virtual memory palace. So I've kind of created almost like a museum here if you like.

And so, as I walk around this kind of virtual museum, I have different locations, and therefore that gives me a place to hook the different verse numbers. So here you can see we're walking around verse numbers one to 10, all hero-based numbers, 11 to 20 are all kind of based on space, and so on and so forth. so 10 locations in each room, a theme for each room, gives you little, little things to kind of have your memory aid. So, item 16. And for this verse item 17 is the Hubble telescope.



So I now have the character to represent the book, an object in this case toes to represent the chapter number, and a location in my memory palace to represent the verse number. To then encode all of this stuff together, it sounds complicated, but it's actually quite easy and a bit of fun. You just create a story. So in this case, I've chosen certain words from the verse, 'faith', 'hearing', 'through' and 'word' to be those kind of memory aids, and I create a story that now encapsulates all of these things together.



So for me, as the **Roman** is walking up to that **telescope**, the Hubble telescope in the memory palace, he suddenly stubs his **toe** on a discarded **blind man's cane**. Now I use a cane to represent faith because you walk by faith and not by sight. He screams out loud, because of the pain from stubbing his toe, he **hears** the echo coming back from this big Hubble telescope. And then as he looks **through** the telescope, he sees a **Bible** at the end. So for me, that allows me to encode the location and the verse, "So **faith** comes by **hearing**, and hearing **through** the **word** of Christ."

[Andrew:] Wow! I'm so impressed, Rob, it's like, I know you're Mr Tech but that's pretty impressive, so well done. And to what extent is this actually working for you then? Are you beginning to retain more verses now, by practice with this method?

[Rob:] Yeah, like I say, I'm at the start of my journey, I've kind of invested quite a lot of time to create the system, but it's actually quite exciting. And I think what I'm finding works the best is somebody will say a verse to me, and I'll instantly remember the story from that verse, which makes it really easy to then find out the location of that verse.

[Andrew:] Okay.

[Rob:] And I think, as with most things, the more that I practice, the more just impermanates [ed: imprints on?] your your mind. So, things will just come to mind.

[Andrew:] Fantastic. So what would you say to encourage others to learn Scripture too? What would you say to others to keep them going?

[Rob:] I think start small, so you don't have to do something as complicated as the system that I put together, and but maybe start with your favourite verses and find a fun and exciting way to remember the stuff. And generally speaking, our brains don't really forget stuff, they just forget how to recall the things that we've memorised. And so, find different ways to recall it. It might be not just words or writing things down on paper, it could be a dance, or it could be a song, it could be a smell or a site or a location. Our memories encode all these different senses together, so if you can explore those different senses, as you memorise scripture, it will definitely help bring stuff back.

[Andrew:] Great, well, thank you so much Rob, that's such a fascinating way in to exploring Scripture and we do hope that people would take that as an inspiration for them to find their own way too, so thank you. Great to see you, great to talk to you.

We're now going to move on to a couple of songs. And this is an opportunity to lift our hearts to God. So I'm going to hand it off now and we'll play two songs to worship God to.

1st Song: So Will I (a 100 billion times)

Verse 1:

God of creation
There at the start
Before the beginning of time
With no point of reference
You spoke to the dark
And fleshed out the wonder of light

Chorus 1:

And as You speak
A hundred billion galaxies are born
In the vapour of your breath the planets form
If the stars were made to worship so will I

Verse 2:

God of Your promise
You don't speak in vain
No syllable empty or void
For once You have spoken
All nature and science
Follow the sound of Your voice

Chorus 2:

And as You speak
A hundred billion creatures catch Your breath
Evolving in pursuit of what You said
If creation still obeys You so will I

Bridge:

If the stars were made to worship so will I
If the mountains bow in reverence so will I
If the oceans roar Your greatness so will I
For if everything exists to lift You high so will I
If the wind goes where you send it so will I
If the rocks cry out in silence so will I
If the sum of all our praises still falls shy
Then we'll sing again a hundred billion times

Verse 3:

God of salvation
You chased down my heart
Through all of my failure and pride
On a hill You created
The light of the world
Abandoned in darkness to die

Chorus 3:

And as You speak
A hundred billion failures disappear
Where You lost Your life so I could find it here
If You left the grave behind You so will I
I can see Your heart in everything You've done
Every part designed in a work of art called love
If you gladly choose surrender so will I

Tag:

Like You would again a hundred billion times
But what measure could amount to Your desire
You're the One who never leaves the one behind

2nd Song: We Bow Down

Verse:

We bow down and confess
You are Lord in this place.
We bow down and confess
You are Lord in this place.

Repeat verse

Chorus:

You are all I need,
It's Your face I seek;
In the presence of Your light
We bow down, we bow down.

Repeat verse

Chorus

We bow down, we bow down, we bow down.

Reading: 2 Timothy 4:1-4 [NIVUK]

So let's continue to pray for a moment before we have our reading. Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, would You incline our hearts towards You now. We do choose to bow down. We put to one side all the other things that clamour for our attention. And we focus on You.

And Lord Jesus, we pray that as we hear Your written Word, now, that it would touch our spirits. And as we anticipate Phil coming to speak to us on how to interpret Your Word, we pray that we would be very teachable, so that we can put into practice what we learn today. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

So our reading today is taken from the second letter of Timothy. It's chapter 4, and it's the first four verses: 1 to 4.

1 In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: **2** preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage – with great patience and careful instruction. **3** For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather round them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. **4** They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.

The Word of the Lord.

Talk

So I'm going to hand over to Phil in a moment. Let me just pray for Phil.

Lord Jesus, I pray for Your grace and Your love to rest on Phil now, that You would help him speak to us, in Jesus' Holy Name. Amen.

Over to you, Phil.

[Phil Swards:]

Amen. Thank you, Andrew. Well, good morning and I hope you are well on this third Sunday in Advent. First of all, I'd like to say thank you to all of the people that have gone before me in speaking in this series, it's been a really helpful series and a very, very timely one too, very much in season.

You'll find in this talk, I'll be referencing at some points, the points that Graham Archer made, way back on the 8th of November (gosh, it seems a long time ago now). Now I'm just going to read out the five points. I don't have the technical prowess that Graham does. So if you want to marvel at his awesome visual aids, you'll have to go back and watch [or read] the November 8th service. In fact go and watch [or read] it anyway. But for now, I'll read those five points out. Graham was talking about five things that we can say about the Bible: its authority, its integrity, its knowledge, its love and its timelessness: it stands the test of time.

So I'm going to talk a little bit about how to interpret the Bible, how to interpret the Word of God. And I'm going to suggest we look at this in three ways, three elements to it, all beginning with A, so it's easy to remember: approach, analysis, and application.

So let's start off with **approach**. Now, you might approach the Bible in a number of ways: you might approach it as though it were a collection of nice stories about some things that happened a long time ago, but aren't really relevant today; or you might value the Bible as a collection of really interesting teaching given by Jesus, which can be quite helpful if remembered or quoted in the right situations; or you may be a Christian who has an understanding that the Bible is quite important, but you've read it once, well, parts anyway, and how many books do you read more than once, in any case? And there's always a bit of Bible reading in church services so so that's okay - at least if you go. So really it's a bit of an optional extra isn't it? Or you may approach the Bible as an essential part of your Christian life, a timeless authority, something which brings you closer to God. The more you engage with it, as it says in 2 Timothy 3:16-17,

16 All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, **17** so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

I wonder how often we come to read the Bible expecting to be trained in righteousness, corrected, and rebuked or taught. See, the Bible is, to coin the title of a film way back from 1965, it's the Greatest Story Ever Told, well maybe the Greatest Love Story Ever Told. It's a story of the love of God for His people. It tells us about God's creation, an act of supreme love. It tells us about the relationship between God and His people, how God's people often turn away from Him, and how God continues to love them. And that's a love that culminates in God sending Jesus Christ, His only Son, fully God, fully man, fully human, fully divine, to die for us on the Cross to pay the penalty for our sins, and it's a story that ends with a marvellous banquet, a marvellous wedding feast in Revelation, in Heaven. Because God loves us, He wants us to be in Heaven with Him, He wants us to make that journey, to complete it.

I sometimes think of the Bible in this way, it's not an exact analogy, but sometimes helps me. If I was taking a journey by car to John o'Groats, I would probably rely on three things:

- Now, I sort of roughly know the way I'm going to John o'Groats, there are a couple of motorways you can take up through England to the Scottish border and then beyond there it's a little hazy but it's sort of just about perhaps, maybe work it out or not. So I would need a **map** to show me the, to show me the way and of course if I got lost then that helps me to get back on track.
- Secondly I might want to refer to the **maker's handbook** for the car I'm making the journey in. The maker's handbook includes useful stuff like how much air to put in the tyres, what fuel to put in the tank (I've made that mistake before!). And it also helps you to know what those warning lights on the dashboard mean when they light up mid-journey.
- I also refer to the **Highway Code**. Now, you're supposed to read the Highway Code every couple of years, or at least regularly, and to buy a new one

every time there's a new issue. I'm not quite sure I do that. But the Highway Code is there to help you make the journey safely, safely for yourself, and also safely for other road users as well.

And of course, life is a journey. And we need things to help us, and in our Christian journey we need a map, we need to know where we're going. We need the maker's handbook, the manufacturer's Handbook, we need to know how to look after the vehicle in which we're making this journey. And we need to know about how to make that journey safely for ourselves, and also for those around us.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus prays (Matthew 6:11), "Give us this day our daily bread," and a couple of chapters before that, in Matthew chapter 4, He reminds us that "Man cannot live by bread alone, but on every word that proceeds from the mouth of God," quoting Deuteronomy 8:3. And as much as we need our daily ration of bread, we also need our daily ration of the Word, if we're serious about making that journey.

So that's a bit about the approach that we should take to the Bible. The second A is **analysis**, or we might call it exegesis. And that's really a question of what does the passage or what did the passage we're looking at mean to the people for whom it was written in the first place? The people who read it, or perhaps more likely in most cases, the people who heard it read. And to do this you need some help. And here are some things that you need:

- First of all you need a Bible handbook. Now, I've got one here. This is the Lion Handbook to the Bible, I have two because I'm always lending one to people. Very useful, particularly for new Christians, but an essential guide anyway, because it gives you an overview, both of the Bible, and also of the particular books in the Bible. So it helps you to have that bigger picture.
- And then you need a good translation, and to get a good translation you're aiming at something called 'dynamic equivalence'. What does that mean? Well, dynamic equivalence:
 - the equivalence bit is about finding a translation which is close to the to the original, to the original Greek or the original Hebrew, equivalence, close to the original text;
 - and then the dynamic is about it being written in a translation being written in a way which makes it easy to read and understand, in the vernacular, we might say.
 - So you're looking at something which strikes a balance between on the one hand, being close to the original, on the other hand, being close to common everyday speech; so you want something sort of in the middle.

And generally speaking, the translation that most people say would satisfy that is the NIV, there's a copy there. And this in particular is a good copy of the NIV I think, it's a Study Bible. There in the middle of the page, it's got references to other parts of the Bible, where the text is dealing with the same thing or, is quoting it. So the NIV is just about in the middle.

Over towards the equivalence side, you get things like the Revised Standard Version, the New Revised Standard Version, the English Standard Version. They're just on the equivalence side [ed: even more so, the New American Standard Bible¹], and then on the dynamic side, very slightly, you get the Good News Bible. And those are the sort of translations you want to be going for.

Just a word of caution: if you're used to using The Message, The Message is, you know, very interesting copy to read, it's not really a translation, it's more of a paraphrase. In fact Eugene Peterson, who wrote it, described it as a personal paraphrase. So if you're using The Message, and that helps you, that's fine, but I would suggest you also pair that with NIV, or the RSV perhaps, just to get a bit more of a balance.

1 <https://libertyculture.com/2008/04/02/search-for-a-formal-translation-nasb-vs-esv-vs-nrsv-a-conclusion/>

But as I said, the question here is, what did the passage mean to the people who read it, or to whom it was read for the first time? And this really is critical, because we need to understand how they understood it, before we have any chance of learning something from the text. And that's why context and genre are so important. And my tip, if you're just starting off in your Christian journey, is don't start at the beginning of the Bible. Don't start with Genesis or read it as a chronological account, because that's not really how it's organised.

There are different genre, different types of literature in the Bible and not all of them mean the same, though they may share a common theme. There's history, there's legal code, there's instructions, prophecies, prayer. Some of it's in prose, some of it's in poetry. There are even different genre in the same book of the Bible. If you think about the Gospel of Matthew, that's got narrative, it's got teaching, it's got prophecy, it's got parables. And most of the books of the Bible are interconnected, which is why that NIV Study Bible is so, so useful.

Most of the books of Bible are interconnected in some way and much of it needs to be read with pieces of paper slotted into the pages elsewhere, marking other passages. For example, when you're reading Paul's epistles it's useful to know what's going on in the book of Acts, because these epistles were written in real time during the accounts of actual events that are narrated in Acts. So understanding the context there is quite important.

And when you're reading, for example, something like Isaiah, Isaiah is predominantly a book of prophecy, but it also includes some passages of history, and it relates to the history that's taking place in 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles. It's also related to prophets who were speaking at the same time as Isaiah. So, Amos, Hosea and Micah, and then later on to Jeremiah, so you'd need to reference those as well.

And then, for example, you come to something like Judges and Kings, because it's important to see how a book fits into the canon of the Bible, and Judges is the probably the most chaotic book in the whole of the Bible, if you read it. Four times it says in the text, "Israel had no king," and on two of those occasions, it says, to explain that a bit, "Everyone did as they saw fit," and it ends with with a summary in Judges 21:25, "In those days, Israel had no king. Everyone did as they saw fit." So what is that telling us? That monarchy is the only form of government? Well no, because just go on to read 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings and 1 and 2 Chronicles. Look at the way that things went when there was a monarchy in ancient Israel. The misdeeds of the kings give us the examples of how we should not conduct ourselves, and what happens when absolute control is in the hands of rulers who turn away from God. So, you can get a very false picture of reading Judges if you don't go on and put it into context in the canon of the Bible.

And that reminds us that in those types of books, sometimes the example of the text is de-scriptive not pre-scriptive. We're not being taught to do what those kings did in 1 and 2 Kings, for example, it's just a narrative, it's not normative.

And then thirdly, the third A, **application**, which is sometimes called hermeneutics. And how do we apply the message of the text to our lives in this day and age? What is the passage, the quotation, the verse, saying to me or saying to us? Now, partly that's going to depend on on your approach to the Bible. But we've just gone past the second Sunday of Advent last week, and that's sometimes called Bible Sunday, and the collect for the day talks about the Bible and it encourages us to read the Bible, and it says, "Read, mark, learn and inwardly digest." And that's not a bad bit of instruction, "Read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest." So when we come to a passage of the Bible we

should think and pray about what we've read. As I've said, that will depend on our approach and the analysis we've done. If we've done those things, what is it that we've read? Think and pray about it. Does what we've read fit into a broader pattern of God, challenging me or challenging us on this particular topic? Perhaps through His Word, through prayer, through the Holy Spirit, to other people, or a combination of these things. And if you're confused, ask somebody you know who reads the Bible regularly and who can give you some assistance, somebody you trust.

And then we need to understand whether the passage we're looking at is general or is consistent or is occasional. And what I mean by that is, whether it's general application, or specific application, a one-off.

- For example, in 1 Timothy chapter 5 verse 23, Paul says to Timothy, "Stop drinking only water and use a little wine." So is that a general application? Is Paul telling all Christians not to drink water and to use a little wine? Well no, because Paul goes on to say, "because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses." So here is Paul giving a bit of specific guidance to Timothy. Of course there's a general point there. We should take care of ourselves.
- And then there's Philemon chapter 1, verse 22, Paul says, "Prepare a room for me." Well, is that a general application? Should we all be preparing a room for Paul? Well, of course not. But we may want to think about hospitality, and how that's challenging us on hospitality.

So we need to ask ourselves, "Is the Bible saying this just in this place, a specific application, or is it a general application, is it saying it in other places?" And of course we can make the opposite mistake as well. We can read something and say, oh, Paul's saying this once, we don't need to worry about it.

- For example, we might come to Ephesians 5:18 and say, where Paul says, "Don't get drunk on wine but on the Holy Spirit."
 - And we might say, "Oh but this is just Paul saying this in one context. He's only saying it to the Ephesian church." Well no, because Paul says it in other books, other letters as well: in 1 [Thessalonians] 5, and in Titus 2, for example. So it is a general application.
 - Then you might say, "yes, but it's only Paul who's saying this, what about other people?" Well, Peter says it in 1 Peter 4:3, and it also says it in numerous places in the Old Testament as well. So it's a general application.
 - Then you might say, "Ah yes, but Paul's only talking about wine here. What about beer and glue and drugs? That's okay, surely, because it doesn't say so." Well, no, it doesn't say so specifically but 1 Corinthians 6:19, "Your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit." And you'll notice also when Paul and other New Testament writers talk about getting drunk, they connect that with other signs of unwholesome activity. And so they're guarding us against that. So, getting drunk on wine, getting drunk is a general application, not a specific one.

And then, thirdly, we should ask ourselves when we're looking at a passage, "**Is this bringing me closer to the holiness of God?**" 1 Thessalonians 4:7 reminds us that "God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life." We get that also in Romans 1:7 and 1 Corinthians 1 [verse 2], as well as in Leviticus, for example. So the question here is this: if I follow what I interpret the Bible is saying to me here, does that moves me closer to the holiness of God as expressed in the Bible, here and elsewhere? If it does, I've probably got it right. If it doesn't, I probably haven't got it right. Now, let's be clear. We don't earn our salvation through good works to becoming more holy, that just isn't possible. Salvation comes by faith alone, through grace alone, the grace of Jesus Christ who died on the Cross to pay the penalty for our sinful nature, while we were still sinners. But as God's forgiven people, our response to that act of saving love is to become more like the people God intended us to be. Remember that teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness is put there for us by a loving God, who wants the best for us, and He knows best.

Finally, when we come to a passage, it's worth asking, "Who's speaking here?" Is it us, or is it God? And what I mean by that is, it is easy to go to the Bible for affirmation of what we already believe. Often when reading a passage, our eyes are fixed on the part that we find acceptable, a part that supports our opinions, but that can blind us to the real message, which may be contained in several passages. So we might be taking the message out of context. And again, approach and analysis needs to inform us here. We must resist the temptation to create the God we want, rather than follow the God who is. Because we'll usually find that the God we want is created in our image, whereas we should be following the God in whose image we are created. Reinterpreting God's word for our sake will take us to places where the Bible warns us not to go. So we should be very careful not to reinterpret; rather we should seek to interpret correctly.

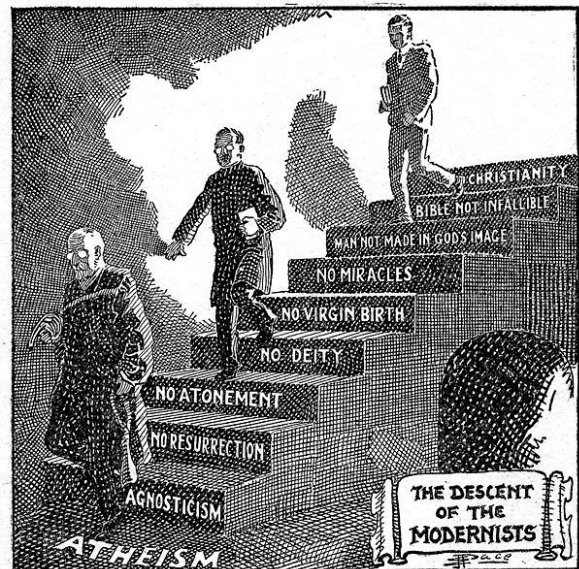
When we read the Bible, the society we live, the spirit of this age, will always be saying to us, "It doesn't really mean that. That's out of date, things have moved on." But that quite literally is the oldest trick in the book. Genesis 3:1-5, the serpent says to Eve, "Did God really say that? Is that what He really meant?" When Jesus is talking in the Sermon on the Mount, He didn't say, "You don't need to worry about the Old Testament, it's 1,000 years old. I've read all of that stuff in there about the law. You don't need to worry about it." No, in Matthew 5:17-19, He says this:

17 'Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them. 18 For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. 19 Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practises and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

The Bible is authoritative and timeless. So where our interpretation of the Bible brings us closer to the values of society around us, we should be on our guard. Because the values of the Kingdom are diametrically opposed to the values of the world, the flesh and the devil. 2 Timothy 4:3-4, which Andrew read earlier on,

3 For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather round them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. 4 They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.

I want to finish with a cartoon. This is a cartoon by a guy called E.J. Pace. He painted it in 1946, an American Christian teacher, but also an excellent cartoonist as well. And this is one of his most famous cartoons. It's called *The Descent of the Modernists*. By Modernists he meant, in those days, liberal theologians. We could also, I suppose, call them premodernists [ed: not postmodernists?]. But you'll notice what's going on here. This is a line of chaps. You start at the top of the staircase, where it says Christianity. They are heading on their way down to the bottom rung which is Atheism. And what interests me about this is the first step down they take is onto the step and then off the



step again of "The Bible not infallible" or "the Bible not being authoritative," we might say today. So it just shows how important it is for us to get ourselves right with how we interpret the Bible, because once we start down that staircase, it's very difficult to turn around and go back up. As CS Lewis once said, "Indeed the safest road to Hell is the gradual one - the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts."²

So Lord, as we come to study Your Scripture new every day, may we approach it in the right way. May we listen to what You're saying to us there. And may we apply that in our daily lives. Amen.

[Andrew:]

Amen. Thank you so much, Phil. Brilliant, really helpful stuff.

Prayerful response

We're going to have a moment of response now, a time to pray. So, can I just encourage you to be still, to have a moment of reflection on what Phil has been saying to us. Let's just be quiet for a moment.

Lord Jesus, I want to thank You for the gift of the Scriptures. Would You help us now to be honest with ourselves about what our heart-approach is to this book? Do we honour it and revere it as Your authoritative word? Help us to be honest about our approach to it.

And Lord, for those who wrestle with this or have questions about this, Holy Spirit, would You bring conviction in our spirit again, to know the truth, the truth that sets us free.

I also want to pray, Lord Jesus, with regards to our handling of Your Word. Lord, we thank You for the many helps and the guidelines that are available, many commentaries, the online resources that are available. Would You give us competency in reading, analysing, discovering the meaning of Scripture? Would You help us to enjoy and to be diligent in our studies, when thinking of context and genre understanding the different ways in which the passages relate one to another? Lord, would You give us as a church and appetite to study well? Help us to handle God's word properly, carefully and thoughtfully, so that we can properly interpret, accurately interpret, what God wants to say.

And Lord Jesus, with regards to personal application, church application, help us to inwardly digest. Lord, that question that Phil raised, is this bringing us closer to the holiness of God? Is our reading of Scripture bringing us closer to the holiness of God?

Just have a moment of quiet again, and align yourself with God, so that you can move towards how He is and who He is and what He's like, through study, through obedience to His Word.

Lord Jesus, would You train us through the Bible? Would You hold us back from the inclination to make the Bible say what we want it to say? And would You give us courage and integrity, to let God speak through His Word?

So Lord, bless us, as we all go on this journey of study, in submission to Your authoritative Word. Amen.

Intercessions

I'm just going to continue now with some more general intercessions, as we move towards the end of our service. So let's pray and let's lift up to God the needs of the world, of our nation, and other more local needs. Let's pray.

2 C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, first published as a book in 1942

Lord God, we thank You that we are now moving into a new phase during this pandemic, where vaccines are tried, tested, and being delivered in a number of countries, including our own. We pray, Lord Jesus, for patience for the nation, as we wait for the distribution of vaccines. Lord, we thank You for the appropriate distribution according to need for the elderly and for those who are going to be most in need in terms of occupation or health. And I pray, Lord, for the remainder of society, that we would truly be patient as we wait for letters giving us permission to have an injection, and also would You not cause us to be cautious over this Christmas season, to be wise, not to mingle and mix just because of the season, especially when we're this close to making a dent into the impact of COVID-19.

Lord in Your mercy,
hear our prayer.

We pray this time, Lord Jesus for economies in Europe, and especially with regards to the challenging situation of Brexit, and the likelihood of leaving now with no deal. We are in the eleventh hour of this situation, Lord, and it doesn't sound promising at this time. We pray for the future relationship between the UK and the EU. Lord, would You have mercy where we are going to need extra help and extra provision? Would You speak into this circumstance? Would You guide those in authority? And Lord, into January, February and into the future years, we pray for Your help and mercy as we enter into a new phase of how we relate to other countries. Give us grace at this difficult time.

Lord in Your mercy,
hear our prayer.

Lord, with regards to celebrating Christmas here in Kenilworth this time round, Lord, it's going to be different. Even though there are some freedoms being encouraged, we pray for wisdom as we celebrate Christmas differently. I pray, Lord Jesus, for renewed focus on the few that we're going to be with, and maybe on our neighbours who we could speak to on our streets. We remember the birth narratives of when Jesus was first born, there were no shining lights, there were no tinsel, trees, there were no gifts of significance apart from what the Magi brought later. It was a fairly ordinary circumstance, with a young woman giving birth in a very small town. Lord, would You help us to have a down-to-earth approach to the wonder of Christmas? That Christ was born amongst us in ordinary life? And would You help us this Christmas, to not moan about the smallness of Christmas this year, but to embrace it, as maybe a way back in to understand what it was like, first time round?

Lord, in Your mercy,
hear our prayer.

We'll just have a moment of pause now. Lift up to God, anyone you know who may be struggling or who is sick at this time. Let's pray.

Lord, in Your mercy,
hear our prayer.

And finally, Lord, we pray once again for ourselves. But we pray as a local church community, that we would be known as people of God's Word. We still continue next Sunday with more to explore in a focus on Scripture, but we pray, Lord, that our whole arc of who we are, will be a people of God's Word. Would You cause us from today's service, from today's talk especially, to take into this coming week good practice, good intention, and a humble approach to the scriptures.

We ask all these things in the Name of Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Blessing

So we come to the end of our service. Thank you very much for joining us. I'll just finish with a blessing prayer, and then we'll have a song to finish. So let me bless you.

Lord, Jesus, we pray at this third Sunday of Advent, for Your Holy Spirit to rest on all who have watched this service, both live and later.

We pray, Lord, for Your presence to guide and to restore and protect. We pray, Lord Jesus, for Your love and Your grace to mark us over these coming days. And we ask all these things in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

So we'll finish with this song. God bless you. Thank you.

3rd Song: The Potter's Hand

Verse 1:

Beautiful Lord, wonderful Saviour
I know for sure, all of my days
Are held in your hands,
Crafted into your perfect plan

Verse 2:

You gently call me into Your presence
Guiding me by Your Holy Spirit
Teach me dear Lord
To live all of my life through Your eyes

Bridge:

I'm captured by Your Holy calling
Set me apart,
I know You're drawing me to Yourself
Lead me Lord I pray

Chorus:

Take me and mould me,
Use me, fill me
I give my life to the Potter's hand
Hold me, You guide me,
Lead me, walk beside me
I give my life to the Potter's hand

Repeat verse 2

Bridge

Chorus x 2

[Transcribed by Hamish Blair with help from <https://otter.ai>]

[NIVUK unless otherwise stated] Extracts from the Holy Bible, New International Version Anglicised, copyright © 1979, 1984, 2011 Biblica, formerly International Bible Society. [Used by permission](#). All rights reserved. 'NIV' is a registered trademark of Biblica. UK trademark number 1448790

"The Descent of the Modernists", by E. J. Pace, first appearing in the book *Seven Questions in Dispute* by William Jennings Bryan, 1924, New York: Fleming H. Revell Company.

So Will I (100 Billion X) – by Joel Houston, Benjamin Hastings & Michael Fatkin
Copyright © 2017 Hillsong Music Publishing. Used by permission.

We Bow Down – by Viola Grafstöm.
Copyright © 1996 Thankyou Music (Admin. by Capitol Christian Music Publishing)

The Potter's Hand (Beautiful Lord, Wonderful Saviour) – by Darlene Zschech
Copyright © 1997 Hillsong Music – used by permission