

LESSON 2
Principles for Understanding Scripture (1)

Background Information for the Teacher

Objectives:

1. The student can explain what it means to “know the conditions.”
2. The student can list five different types of conditions that could help establishing the meaning of Scripture and can give an example of each.
3. The student can look up in Bible study tools information about conditions that can cast light on a passage of Scripture.

Preparation:

1. Have copies of Written Review No. 1 to hand out at the beginning of class. (At the end of this lesson.)
2. Have a copy of Written Review No. 1 with the answers for the teacher.
3. Have Bibles and pens for all students as needed.
4. Have copies of Worksheet 2 for this lesson ready to distribute. (At the end of this lesson.)
5. Have a chalkboard or overhead projector on which to display key words, ideas, and scriptures.
6. Have a map on which to show Elijah’s travels—either on the screen, the wall, or as a hand-out. A map which you could print as a handout is included.

Theme:

Certain key background information about a passage of Scripture can be very helpful to our understanding it like those who first received it. These are: the situation, the history, the geography, the archaeology, and the culture.

Lesson Plan for Conducting the Class

Introduction: (about 10 minutes)

1. Call the roll and make arrangements to contact those who are missing.
2. Make any necessary announcements.
3. Have a prayer and songs as desired.
4. Check the answers to Written Review No. 1. Do this as a brief review and as a reward to those who have studied and learned the answers. While you will not ask for scores, you can commend those who do well. You could pass around a sheet and ask everyone who took the test to record his/her score somewhere on the sheet. You could average these to obtain the class average. You could work the following week to see if the average can be improved. Here are the answers to Written Review No. 1: 1-c; 2-d; 3-a; 4-c; 5-e; 6-b. Be sure to show



appreciation to all who participated and encourage all to be ready for another written review next week.

Learning Experiences: (about 30 minutes)

1. Over the next few lessons, will study ten words that will give us important clues to a better understanding of Scripture. Each student should seek to memorize these ten words so he/she will be able to run them through his/her mind when studying a passage. Not every one of these will be helpful in studying every passage, but often just remembering the word will give a clue to finding the best understanding of the passage.
2. The first word to learn is conditions. There are often a variety of circumstances in the background of a passage that will illuminate it. We will look at five elements under conditions.
3. The first element of conditions is situation. What circumstances about the writer or the audience for the writing were special? Was there a time of stress, a particular problem to be met, a recent event that was overshadowing them, something about to happen? Here are some passages that will mean much more when we know the situation. (Review as many of these as you have time to do as examples of "situation" and ask class members to pick one of these to remember as a sample of why it helps to know the situation.)
 - a. Read Philippians 4:4-6. **Q:** What do we know about where Paul was when he wrote this epistle? **A:** In prison. Read Philippians 4:4-6. These words have special power when we know they came from a man in prison.
 - b. Read 2 Timothy 4:6-8. **Q:** What was Paul's situation at the time he wrote these words? **A:** Awaiting execution in Rome. Think of how that gives a special significance to these words.
 - c. Read Psalm 51:3, 9-12. **Q:** What has happened in the life of the writer that brought forth these words? **A:** David's sin with Bathsheeba.
4. A second element of conditions is history. What do we know about the history surrounding the events of the passage, either from the Bible or from other sources, that would throw light on its meaning? (Review as many of these samples as you have time for and ask each person to select one of them to remember as an example of "history.")
 - a. Matthew 2:13-18. The story of Herod having the children killed. **Q:** What do we know from history that makes this account about Herod to fit well with his personal qualities? **A:** He was paranoid. He built several palaces and fortresses for his own security. He had his favorite wife and two sons killed because he thought they were plotting against him. Such a man would certainly have ordered the execution of children.



- b. In Daniel 5 we read the story of a feast ordered by Belshazzar, King of Babylon. For many years, there was no historical record of a Babylonian king named Belshazzar. Critics said the Bible was mistaken. About the middle of the nineteenth century, the British Museum received a large number of clay tablets from ancient times. One of these contained the name of Belshazzar. The tablet, from King Nabonidus, last of the Babylonian kings, mentions his son, Belshazzar. Other documents show that although Nabonidus was the actual king, his son reigned in the city of Babylon while the father dealt with matters of the kingdom elsewhere. This information not only is helpful in confirming the accuracy of the Bible story, but also in understanding the words of Daniel 5:16. There the king offers Daniel the "third" place in the kingdom. Since Belshazzar was only number two, it is natural that the highest place he could offer was number three.
3. A third element of conditions is geography. From the Bible and from other sources, we often can know something about the locations mentioned in the Bible that will help us understand a passage. (Use as many examples as you have time for and ask the class to pick one they wish to remember as their example for geography.)
 - a. Much of the story about Jesus takes place on and around the Sea of Galilee. **Q:** What do we know about this large lake that would help us in understanding these passages? **A:** It was about seven miles wide and thirteen miles long and very deep. It was nestled between hills on the east and on the west, which means that winds coming from the north were channeled across the sea, making it subject to very quick turbulence. It was a place where many fished from rather small boats with both oars and a sail to make their living. Its southern outflow became the River Jordan. Read Luke 8:22-25. **Q:** How does this information help with understanding the story? **A:** They could certainly be far enough from shore to be unable to make it to land in such a storm. The boat was large enough to carry several people but small enough to be seriously affected by the winds and waves. The suddenness of the storm was characteristic of the Sea of Galilee. Experienced boatmen still were afraid. Knowing the lake, they were greatly amazed at how quickly the wind died down.
 - b. Ethiopian in the chariot. Many translations say that the place where the Ethiopian was riding was "desert" (Acts 8:26). So, if it was a desert, how could there be enough water to baptize him by immersion? By studying the area from Jerusalem to Gaza, we learn that it is not a desert like the Sahara but a rather deserted place. It



has, however, occasional streams or pools of water. So, geography solves that problem for us.

- c. Following the story of Elijah certainly requires the use of geography. (Provide a map for your class to follow—on the overhead, a wall map, a map in their Bibles, or a map you have printed and handed out.) Find these locations as I tell the story: Elijah lived near the Brook Cherith, east of the Jordan. When that dried up, he went to Zaraphath near Sidon. When the famine was severe in Samaria, Elijah sent word to Ahab to meet him at Mt. Carmel. There Elijah demonstrated that his God was the true God. After killing the prophets of Baal at the Brook of Kishon, Elijah went back to the top of the mountain and had his servant look toward the sea (what sea?). Ahab rode to Jezreel but God allowed Elijah to reach there first. From there, after Jezebel's threat, Elijah fled to Beersheeba. Note how following the story with a map makes it much more vivid in our minds and how much more aware we are of the distances involved.

4. The fourth element of conditions is archaeology. Thousands of artifacts have been discovered in the lands of the Bible that illuminate things the Bible says. (Study as many as you have time for and ask each student to select one case he/she will remember as a sample of this point.) **Q:** What archaeological discovery do you know about that has helped us understand something in the Bible? **A:** (See what the class comes up with. Here are some you can bring up if the class doesn't. Use as many as you have time for.) (1) In 2 Kings 18-19 we read of an attack on Judah when Hezekiah was king in 701 BC. The Bible says the Assyrian king, Sennacherib, came against many cities in Judah including Lachish. From there he sent envoys to Jerusalem asking Hezekiah to surrender. On the advice of Isaiah, Hezekiah refused. He trusted in God. Then Sennacherib moved his army to Jerusalem. The Bible says that in one night God killed 185,000 Assyrian soldiers through a pestilence. So Sennacherib and those remaining left and did not conquer Jerusalem. That is the Bible account. From Sennacherib himself we have two important records about this event. One of them is a six-sided prism on which he left a written record. The other is a set of wall reliefs prepared for his palace walls in which he depicted the conquest of Lachish in visual form. From these two records we learn that Sennacherib conquered 46 cities in Judah, that he did conquer Lachish, that he did go to Jerusalem to confront Hezekiah, and that he "shut up Hezekiah like a bird in a cage," but he does not claim to have conquered Jerusalem. From the wall reliefs we can see what the soldiers and the Israelites looked like and the way in which the battle was carried out. (To see pictures of these two items and get more information about them, go to www.oc.edu/stafford.north. From the menu on this website go



to Tour of British Museum. Among the items described here are these two.) (2) Hezekiah's tunnel, mentioned in 2 Kings 20:20 has been found. (3) Other cases: the names of many Bible characters such as Caiphas, Erastus, David, Ahab, and many others have been discovered in archaeological finds; a cylinder from Persian King Cyrus mentions that he let people captured by the Babylonians return to their homeland and rebuild their temples as the Bible says he allowed the Jews to do; the palace of Sargon, a person many said did not exist, has been found near ancient Nineveh and this Sargon corresponds with the Sargon of Assyria mentioned in Isaiah 20:1; the theater in Ephesus where the riot took place (Acts 19) has been discovered and is still in good condition; the marketplace in Athens where Paul walked and saw the idols and Mars Hill where he spoke have been found; and there are many more.)

5. The fifth element of conditions is culture. So many times knowing the culture in which a Bible event is taking place will help us understand a passage as did those who first received it.
Q: What is some information about culture from Bible times you already know about that helps us understand certain passages in the Bible: **A:** (Let the class bring up those they can recall. Others you may want to mention are: washing the feet of one who came into the house, greeting with a kiss, wearing scripture passages on the head and arm in a phylactery, shunning of lepers, the relationship between Jews and Samaritans, marriage customs, the use of spices to bury and to anoint, and religious practices of both Jews and pagans.)
Q: Look at the parable of the ten virgins in Matthew 25:1-13 and note knowledge of what customs help us understand the passage. **A:** Using lamps for light. In their culture, the lamps were small and needed more oil frequently. Olive oil was usually burned. The practice of waiting for the bridegroom to come to the home of the bride and then of having a feast. The exclusion of those not present on time (at least in this case).
6. Now comes the question, how do we learn the information about the five conditions when we come to study a passage? Here are some tools that can help. (Have a sample of as many of these Bible tools as you can to show.)
 - a. First see if any other place in the Bible provides additional information about the conditions. The story of Sennacherib's coming to Lachish and Jerusalem, for example, is told not only in 2 Kings 18 and 19, but also in 2 Chronicles 32 and in Isaiah 36 and 37. (Ask students if their Bibles give references to those other locations with the 2 Kings 18 and 19 passage.) Taking these passages together will give more of the conditions and, thus will help in understanding. Many Bibles have references such as these in a center column, as footnotes at the bottom of the page or in some other way. Let students see what their Bibles provide and



encourage them to make use of such references. So, a Bible with such references can be helpful in finding out more of the conditions if there are other related passages.

- b. Second, Bible dictionaries and encyclopedias are very good for finding such information as archaeological findings, historical background, and customs. Look up such terms as Lachish, Sennacherib, Hezekiah, and Isaiah for more information on these people and places. Some Bibles will have a short Bible dictionary in the back but these are very limited. It is much better to have something like the 3-volume, Illustrated Bible Dictionary published by Intervarsity Press. It is a very good one, is basically conservative, and is available from on-line book stores for about \$60.
- c. A good commentary will often provide useful background information about the people and places and customs.
- d. A Bible atlas will specialize in different maps that focus on particular time periods. Ask students to look in the back of their Bibles to see what maps are available there. Sometimes a place is known in the Old Testament but was no longer around in New Testament times. So getting a map that covers not only the place but the time period you are interested in can be helpful.
- e. There are also books that specialize in the customs and life of various periods in Bible history. These can provide useful information about dress, housing, travel, life-style, and many other details.
- f. Books on archaeology can be very helpful such as John McRay's Archaeology of the New Testament.
- g. Bible software packages can be very helpful in looking up verses, comparing different translations, and even studying words in original languages.
- h. The internet can also give useful information about history, archaeology, and culture. Go to your favorite Internet search engine like Yahoo or Google and type in the name of what you are looking for. The more specific the entry, the better. So Nebuchadnezzar will be more likely to get information about the Daniel period than just Babylon. Some of the information on the internet can be very helpful but some of it may not be accurate because there is no screening process through which it goes, such as the editor at a standard publishing company.

Application: (3 minutes)

1. This study should help us be more committed to looking for information about passages to help us understand them. It is not enough just to read the passage cold without searching for more information about it. Remember these five factors in



conditions: situation, history, geography, archaeology, and culture.

2. As you listen to sermons and Bible school teachers, check to see if they are helping you to understand a passage by providing useful information about conditions.

Assignment: (2 minutes)

1. Use your review sheet to study the five elements of conditions we have considered and be able to write them down with an example of some Bible passage that you can understand better because you had that type of information.
2. Check out the book of Obadiah for next week. See what you can learn about it from the type of sources we have mentioned. Our next class will begin by asking you to share what you have learned about these five elements of conditions that can help us with our understanding of that one-chapter book from the Old Testament.



**WRITTEN REVIEW NO. 1
(over Lesson No. 1 to be given with Lesson No. 2)**

Mark the one correct answer in each question.

1. In inspiring people to write Scripture,
 - a. God dictated every word.
 - b. God gave an idea to people and let them put the message in their own words.
 - c. God guided the process, using different means of revelation, so that the outcome is exactly what He wanted.

2. The document the Bible writer himself produced is called
 - a. The cardiograph
 - b. The polygraph
 - c. The seismograph
 - d. The autograph

3. The end product of the process of communication which the originator seeks is for another to:
 - a. Think a thought
 - b. Hear a sound
 - c. Decode a message

4. Step 2 in the process by which we got our Bible is:
 - a. Man Copies
 - b. Man Translates
 - c. Inspired Man Records
 - d. Inspired Man Creates

5. The number of Greek manuscripts containing some or all of the New Testament books is close to:
 - a. 1000
 - b. 2000
 - c. 3000
 - d. 4000
 - e. 5000

6. Which of the following is a passage from which God has told us something about the nature of inspiration?
 - a. 1 John 3:10
 - b. 2 Peter 1:20
 - c. 1 Timothy 1:11
 - d. 1 Corinthians 9:21



**UNDERSTANDING SCRIPTURE
WORKSHEET NO. 2**

1. The first of the ten principles we want to learn is _____.
2. Under conditions, the first of the five elements to note is _____.
A passage I want to remember that illustrates situation is _____.
3. The second of the five elements of conditions is _____.
A passage I want to remember that illustrates history is _____.
4. The third of the five elements of conditions is _____.
A passage I want to remember that illustrates geography is _____.
5. The fourth of the five elements of conditions is _____.
A passage I want to remember that illustrates archaeology is _____.
6. The fifth of the five elements of conditions is _____.
A passage I want to remember that illustrates culture is _____.
7. Below are some of the tools for Bible study I think would be helpful for me:

FOR THE WRITTEN REVIEW AT THE NEXT CLASS PERIOD, KNOW THE FIVE ELEMENTS OF "CONDITIONS" AND BE ABLE TO GIVE A SCRIPTURE FOR A CASE WITH EACH.

