

LESSON 5

**Principles for Understanding Scripture (4)
Background Information for the Teacher**

Objectives:

1. The student can demonstrate different ways of learning about word meanings in Scripture.
2. The student can explain the term "syntax" and give an example of how this is an important principle in understanding Scripture.

Preparation:

1. Have copies of Written Review No. 4 to hand out at the beginning of class.
2. Have Bibles and pens as needed.
3. Have copies of Worksheet No. 5 for students to use during this lesson. Teachers should fill out one of these for their own use prior to the lesson. This will help them be sure all the key words are covered.
4. Have a chalkboard or overhead projector on which to display key words, ideas, and scriptures.
5. Be ready to discuss Revelation 3:20 with the class in terms of context and speaker/audience.

Theme: Proper interpretation of Scripture requires careful study of individual words and analysis of the syntax of a passage.

Lesson Plan for Conducting the Class

Introduction: (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. 4. The answers are: 1—The circle should have the following words—passage, paragraph, chapter, book, Testament, Bible. 2—1 Corinthians 13:1; Acts 16:31; James 3:1; 1 John 2:15; 1 Corinthians 1:17. 3—speaker/audience. 4—Christian.

Learning Experiences: (about 30 minutes)

1. We studied so far, four principles to use in understanding scripture. **Q:** What are they? **A:** Conditions, genre, context, and speaker/audience. We assigned Revelation 3:20 for study last week. **Q:** Who spoke these words. **A:** Jesus. **Q:** To whom does He say, "Open the door?" **A:** To Christians in Laodicea. **Q:** What has He said to them previously? **A:** That they were lukewarm and He would spew them out of His mouth. But that He loved them and urged them to repent. **Q:** What does Jesus mean by saying



He is knocking on the door? **A:** I am begging you to let me back into your life. **Q:** Would Jesus admonition to repent and let me into your life fit equally well for someone who is not already a Christian? **A:** No. It would have to be adjusted. There is a sense in which He wants into their lives too, but the conditions would be different. Knowing to whom this admonition was given is important in understanding it as well is the context in which it was said.

2. Obviously one of the important ways to understand a communication is a precise understanding of the meaning of the words used—so our next principle is “words.” **Q:** In what languages was the Bible originally written? **A:** Hebrew and Greek. **Q:** Do we have these original texts to study from? **A:** Yes. As we saw in the first lesson, we have been able to reconstruct the exact texts as they originally were in virtually all of the Old and New Testaments. For the most precise word study, it would be good to know the meaning of the word in the original language, but, even in the translated language, studying words is an important practice.
3. One way to learn a word meaning is to look it up in the dictionary. But regular dictionaries often do not approach a definition as it might be used in the Bible. **Q:** How, for example, would a modern English dictionary define the word “baptism?” **A:** It would give all of the present uses such as sprinkling, pouring, and immersion without regard to the original meaning of the term. So an English dictionary can be helpful, but we must go beyond this to find Bible meanings of words. **Q:** What are other ways to study Bible word meanings? **A:** (Teacher—here is a list many of ways students will list. Let them work on this a while and if there are some here they do not mention, you can add them to the list. Have some sample books of the types mentioned to show in class and to let people browse through afterward.) Compare English translations where the word is used. Books which list several translations side by side are very good for this purpose. Use a Bible word study book such as ones by Vine, Robertson (Word Pictures in the Greek New Testament), and Kittel. These books provide good background study of words appearing in our English Bible. A good concordance such as those by Young and by Strong will give a variety of definitions for a word and often will list under different meanings those passages which make different uses of the word. The concordance will also list other passages in which the word has been used and studying these will often help us have a better understanding of the word’s meaning. Good commentaries will discuss word meanings as they describe the meaning of a passage. Those who know the original languages of Hebrew and/or Greek, can look up the words in lexicons of those languages. And even those who do not know the



languages can use several different Bible software programs which allow one to track an English word back to its Greek or Hebrew word and from there to a definition of that original word. All of these methods are useful and should be used by good Bible students.

4. Remember that finding a word meaning is much more than just learning its basic definition. Often the context must tell us which of the possible meanings of a word the author intends in the passage we are studying. **Q:** What does the word "elder" mean in the New Testament? **A:** Those who oversee the work of the church? **Q:** What does "elder" mean in the following passages? Matthew 15:2. **A:** Jewish religious leaders. 1 Timothy 5:1. Any older man. 1 Peter 5:1. Elders in the sense of the overseers of the church. 1 Peter 5:5. Younger men should submit to older men, not just to the elders of the church. This would seem to be the case because of the contrast between younger and older. **Q:** How do we determine which meaning of a word to use? **A:** Normally the context and who says it to whom will give us the clues.
5. Let's look at a few examples of how word study can benefit our Bible study.
 - a. **Q:** What is the root meaning of the word "baptize." **A:** Immerse. So when we come to this word, we should always think in terms of immersion, being submerged. The meaning of the word helps us, then, to understand the act of baptism.
 - b. **Q:** Did the Greeks have more than one word for our word "love?" **A:** Yes. Their word philos, meant the love of friends for each other. Their word agape means to love in the sense of treating people kindly whether they are good to us or not. Their word eros had reference to romantic love and from this word we get our word erotic. It is helpful as we come across the word "love" in our Bibles, then, to know which of the Greek words is being used because that will help us understand the meaning. The word for "love your enemies," for example, is agape, which means treat them well. It does not mean we are to feel toward them as we would our friends. Some translations will have a footnote to show the difference. Sometimes we may need to find the answer in a commentary or on Bible software that allows us to look up words in the original text.
 - c. Jesus says, "Blessed are the meek," in Matthew 5:5. **Q:** What does the word meek usually mean to us? **A:** Someone who is weak and often pushed around. But this is not the meaning of the term in Scripture. Jesus meant something like, "strength under control" or one who can respond to criticism with gentleness. The Greeks used the word to refer to a horse that



had been broken—still just as strong, but now willing to accept orders. **Q:** Where can we learn such things about the words of Scripture? **A:** From good commentaries, Bible word study books such as those by Vines, Kittel, and Robertson, from Bible dictionaries and encyclopedias, and from Bible software packages.

- d. An interesting case of word study comes as we look at John 6:53. Here Jesus says, "Whoever eats my flesh and drink my blood has eternal life." **Q:** What does Jesus mean here by His flesh and blood. **A:** We know that "flesh" could mean Jesus actual flesh and "blood" His actual blood. But we think that must not be the meaning because no one ever did eat His actual flesh and we can't do it now. So we are led to look for a different meaning to the words. Some have connected this to taking the Lord's Supper. If we eat the bread and drink the cup of the Supper we will have eternal life. But would Jesus here be referring to that supper not even instituted yet? And would He be teaching that if we just eat the supper we have eternal life? Let's let the context help us with the word meaning here. A few verses later, in verse 63, Jesus says, "The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life." So, Jesus means that we must eat and drink of His teaching and then we can have eternal life. That is the meaning of the song, "Break thou the bread of life" which is not a song about the Lord's Supper but a song about partaking of His word.
6. Now let's turn to another principle: syntax. This is a word we don't use very often, but an important concept for us in our study of scripture. The word syntax refers to the way language works—particularly in word groups. Before we can understand a passage, then, we must not only look at individual words, but at words in groups. This word covers, then, such things as words in phrases, clauses, sentences and paragraphs. It also speaks to such things as forms of words, pronouns, and the connecting words that put other words together.
7. Open your Bibles to Romans 8. Let someone read the first word in each verse and note how many of the verses begin with a conjunction—a connecting word like "therefore," or "because," or "for," "and." To understand this passage, then, one must not take verses in isolation but must track back to see the connections indicated by these words. Have someone read 1 Corinthians 3:16-17. **Q:** Does Paul here mean that each of us is God's temple or that we together are God's temple? **A:** Here he is speaking of all of us together as God's temple. We know this because he uses



the plural when he says "you yourselves." This is not so evident from the NIV but is from other translations which use the word "ye" and also from the original language. Now read 1 Corinthians 6:19. **Q:** Same question. Is this singular or plural? Am I a temple of the Holy Spirit or are we collectively that temple? **A:** Now Paul uses the singular and means that each of us individually is a depository of the Holy Spirit and we must live moral lives that reflect that indwelling. Read 1 John 3:9. **Q:** Does this mean that one who has been born of God cannot commit a sin? **A:** No, it means will not continue to sin. The NIV here translates "will continue to sin" while the NRSV has "do not sin." The Greek verb here is in a tense that suggests "continuous action" rather than a one-time event. The passage means, then, that Christians do not live in continuing sin even though we will sin at some points along the way. 1 John 1:8 says that if we claim we do not sin, we are liars. The previous verse says that "if we walk in the light . . . the blood of Jesus [keeps on] cleansing us from our sins." From the same book (context), we get additional information. As we walk in the light we will occasionally stumble (sin), and, when we do, Jesus blood can cleanse us when we confess our mistake. But this is different than walking in the darkness, which represents "continuing in sin" (v. 6). This last case represents how useful it can be to look at such things as the tense of the verb and a study of the whole sentence. And this is the type of thing we do as we consider syntax.

Application: (about 3 minutes)

1. The effective study of Scripture must involve a study of individual words and of words in groups such as phrases, sentences, and paragraphs. It also means that we think about pronouns, conjunctions, and even the tense of verbs. Bible study can and should be an exact process and we need to remember that God has given us His word in a form that allows this exactness.
2. Ask the students which verses we studied today have been most helpful to them.

Assignment: (about 2 minutes)

1. Use the worksheet to prepare for the written review to be given at the next class meeting.
2. For the next class meeting, study Ephesians 6:1-4. Look up the meaning of some of the key words. Ask how this section connects with the preceding chapter. Analyze by asking such key questions as "Who?," "What?," and "Why?" Questions like these help to see connections and this is part of what syntax is about.



**UNDERSTANDING SCRIPTURE
WORKSHEET NO. 5**

1. Some ways I could learn the meaning of a word are:

2. Some words to illustrate the need for studying word meanings are:

3. Syntax refers to the way _____ works, particularly in word _____. This covers such things as looking at words in _____, clauses, _____, and paragraphs. Studying syntax also deals with forms of _____, _____, and connecting words.

4. Some samples of the uses of "syntax" are:

STUDY FOR NEXT TIME EPHESIANS 6:1-4. LOOK UP SOME OF THE KEY WORDS. HOW DO THESE VERSES CONNECT WITH THE PREVIOUS CHAPTER? ASK OF THE VERSES SUCH QUESTIONS AS WHO? WHAT? AND WHY? THESE ARE ANALYTICAL QUESTIONS THAT HELP US SEE HOW ELEMENTS OF THE PASSAGE CONNECT.



**WRITTEN REVIEW NO. 4
(For use with Lesson No. 5)**

1. Draw the circle about context with the words in the proper place.

2. Give an example of a passage we studied the context and found it helpful. Give the Scripture citation if you can. Tell something about why a study of the context was helpful.

3. To remember to ask "who said it and to whom," we use these two words:

4. In Acts 8:22, who spoke to whom? The fact that the person spoken to may be described as a _____ helps us understand how to use this passage.

