

*Want to understand the Bible? Here's how!*

## Guidelines for Interpreting the Bible

1. **Translation:** Respect word meanings, grammar, etc. of the original languages. (The Bible was written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. Reliable translations are those written by many translators, and will follow this first rule.)
2. **Language:** Remember that our human language is expressing divine thoughts. Words can be used in many senses – apocalyptic, poetic, dramatic, or even figurative, as well as literal.
3. **Literal Meaning:** Accept the most literal interpretation of a passage, unless there is some strong, compelling reason to do otherwise.
4. **The Supernatural:** Make room for the supernatural. After all, the Bible starts with, “In the beginning, God...”
5. **History:** Consider the historical perspective of the people to whom a passage was spoken or written. (For example, “forever” may only be “forever” from the limited perspective of the intended audience.)
6. **Larger Context:** Expect Bible passages to explain themselves. God’s truth was revealed progressively, little by little over time, so our understanding must reconcile all the passages on a given topic. Use cross-references and related passages frequently.
7. **Immediate Context:** Allow Bible passages to explain themselves, by reading the surrounding verses.
8. **Persistence:** Keep looking for other passages and other ideas to help toward its understanding.
9. **Limited Focus:** Allow for the unknown and unknowable. Some matters may be obscure because we read only one side of the “conversation,” or because of our limited understanding of the specific cultural or social context. We must be aware when we leave the statements of the text and start speculating.
10. **Application:** The Bible is intended to change lives, not simply to educate or entertain. Take what you know to be true, and start practicing it. Remember Deuteronomy 29:29!

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### *Don't ...*

1. Don't **study from a translation that's hard to understand**. There are easy-to-read modern translations in every major language in the world.
2. Don't **study from unreliable translations**. (Reliable translations can be verified. Translations by only one person or by one religious group, and versions trying to paraphrase the text's meaning should be avoided.)
3. Don't **expect every word to have a literal meaning**. But don't dismiss a passage just because the literal meaning would be surprising or supernatural.
4. Don't **speculate**.
5. Don't **bring your own agenda** to the passage.
6. Don't **leave out passages** that clearly address your topic, even if they're difficult to understand.
7. Don't **stop** studying the Bible; keep wrestling with difficult passages.
8. Don't **expect** the Bible to have **answers to every question** you may ask.
9. Don't **expect the Bible to be something it's not**. *For example, it's not a science text book.*
10. Don't **focus** on “book knowledge” or “Bible trivia” **to the exclusion of** trying to live by what you clearly understand.