

Ministry Leaders Training | March 9, 2025  
Rightly Handling the Word of Truth:  
 Principles for Interpreting the Bible

*“Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.” - 2 Timothy 2:15*

## 1. Recognize and account for the dual authorship of Scripture.

- **Incarnational Analogy:** Jesus was fully God and full Man; He had a divine nature and a human nature. In an analogous way, we can understand the authorship of the Bible. It was written by humans in particular times and places, addressing particular issues. It is equally true that the Bible was written by God - the human authors were inspired - with a transcending purpose for all time.
- **Human Authorship:** Given the human authorship of Scripture, we must take seriously the historical context, theological perspective, and literal style of each author in our interpretation.
- **Divine Authorship:** Given the divine authorship of Scripture, we must take seriously its authority (it is the Word of God), necessity (it is essential for salvation and life), and sufficiency (it contains all we need to be right with God and live for Him).

**Acts 1:16** - *“Brothers, the Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of David...”*

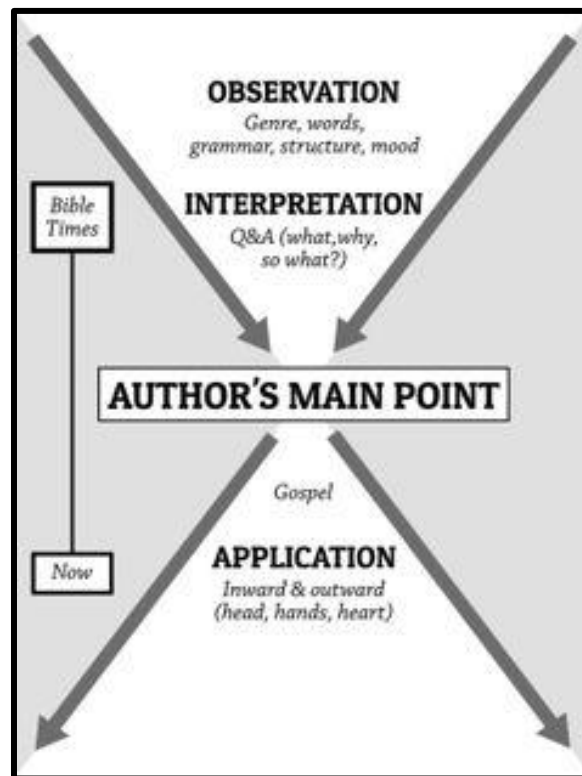
**2 Timothy 3:16-17** - *“All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,<sup>17</sup> that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.”*

**2 Peter 1:19-21** - *“And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts,<sup>20</sup> knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation.<sup>21</sup> For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.”*

**Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy:** We affirm that the written Word in its entirety is revelation given by God. We affirm that God who made mankind in His image has used language as a means of revelation. We affirm that the whole of Scripture and all its parts, down to the very words of the original, were given by divine inspiration. We affirm that God in His Work of inspiration utilized the distinctive personalities and literary styles of the writers whom He had chosen and prepared. (# 3, 4, 6, 7, 8)

## 2. Follow the basic hermeneutic method of Observe, Interpret, Apply.

- **Hermeneutics:** There are a vast numbers of books on *hermeneutics* (principles of biblical interpretation), but most include three basic components:
  - 1- **Observation:** What does the text say?
  - 2- **Interpretation:** What does the text mean?
  - 3- **Application:** How should it affect my life?
- **Slow Down:** In our excitement to bring the Bible's power to our personal life, we should never skip over the critical steps of observation and interpretation. We need to read it again for the first time.
- **Observation:** Look closely and notice how the passage is organized. Make an outline. Look closely at repeated words or themes, grammar, structure, transitions.
- **Interpretation:** Take into account the literary and historical context and the passage's connection to the overall purpose of the book. What was the author's main point? Why is the passage written this way?
- **Application:** Now see how the original meaning relates to our contemporary context, and we can make powerful and accurate application of God's Word to our personal life. How does this apply through Christ to what we believe, think, say, and do?



See "Basic Bible Study Skills" by Peter Krol & Kenny Carrington. See [www.knowableword.com](http://www.knowableword.com).

### 3. Passages must be understood within their context.

#### The Danger of Misinterpreting Scripture

- Interpreting passages out of context leads to bad theology. Bad theology can be harmful and misleading.
- Properly understanding scripture in its context helps us see God's true character.

#### What We Should Avoid: Eisegesis

- **Definition:** Eisegesis means "to lead into," where the interpreter injects their own ideas into the text, making it mean whatever they want.
- **Proverbs 23:7** - *"As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he."* (KJV)

#### What We Should Practice: Exegesis

- **Definition:** Exegesis means "to lead out of," where the interpreter draws meaning from the text itself rather than imposing meaning onto it.
- **2 Timothy 2:15** - *"Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth."*

#### Guidelines for Proper Interpretation

1. **Consider Literary Context:** Who is the author? Who is the intended audience? What is their situation and occasion for writing (e.g., in captivity, in a disordered church)? What is God communicating to them in their context?
2. **Consider Historical & Cultural Context:** Understanding Hebrew, Jewish, and Greco-Roman culture can aid in our interpretation, but remember that all the critical details we need can be found in the Bible itself.
3. **Use Reputable Study Resources:** Prayerfully rely on the Holy Spirit. Consult Bible dictionaries, commentaries, and historical texts, especially Jewish history.

#### Understand Words in Context

- Words must be defined based on the author's original intent, not modern usage. Different authors may use words differently.
- Use multiple reputable Bible versions to compare the translation and clarify meaning.

#### Understand Verses in Context

- **Philippians 4:13** - *"I can do all things through him who strengthens me."*
  - **Context:** Paul is discussing contentment in all circumstances, whether in abundance or need. Context shows that Paul is speaking about enduring hardships through Christ's strength, not achieving personal goals.
- **Isaiah 53:5** - *"By His wounds we are healed."*
  - **Context:** The passage speaks about the Messiah bearing our sins, not promising physical healing in this life.

## 4. Scripture is the best interpreter of Scripture.

*2 Timothy 3:16-17 - "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work."*

- **The Authority of Scripture** - It is our highest authority on matters it discusses, and so there is no other authority (reason, tradition, church, experience) that we should look to interpret Scripture.
- **The Sufficiency of Scripture** - (2 Tim. 3:16-17), God has revealed to us everything we need to know in order to come to saving faith in Christ and live a life pleasing to him. Other books or traditions can be helpful to apply or explain, but are not necessary.
- **The Clarity of Scripture** - God wrote a book so that he can be understood, to reveal the truth, not conceal it. So the Bible can be broadly understood by using the normal faculties we would use to read a book.

Not every text is as clear or important as others (Jesus spoke of the weightier matters of the Law (Mat. 23:23), and the greatest commandment (Mat. 22:36-40). The most important doctrines are exceedingly clear. The less clear sections of Scripture should be interpreted in light of the more clear passages of Scripture.

### A Case Study: Saved by Faith and Works?

- **James 2:24** - *"You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone"*
- **Romans 3:28** - *"For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law."* (See also Gal 2:16 and John 3:16)
- **Conclusion:** These passages don't contradict but compliment. Paul is saying that we are not saved by a combination of faith and good works. James is saying that the faith that saves results in good works and is proved by it, otherwise it is just empty words.

### Best Practices:

- Read the whole Bible. Make use of cross references to help make connections.
- Build your theology on clearer passages of Scripture rather than obscure or difficult passages.
- Understand the surrounding context of the passage and book as a whole.
- If it is in a difficult genre of Scripture (poetry or prophecy), look for other texts in more straightforward genres, such as narrative, history, or letters.

*Psalm 119:130 - "The unfolding of your words gives light; it imparts understanding to the simple."*

**Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy:** We affirm that the text of Scripture is to be interpreted by grammatico-historical exegesis, taking account of its literary forms and devices, and that Scripture is to interpret Scripture. (#18)

## 5. Different literary genres must be interpreted differently.

Genre is a form or style of communication. Understanding the genre helps set our expectations for how to interpret. Literary Context gives us cues and even rules about how to approach the text. There are five broad categories of literature in the Bible: Narrative, Law, Wisdom, Prophecy, and Epistle.

1. **Narrative:** Most of the Bible is composed of narrative, an estimated 75 percent! This includes all the historical narratives in the OT, the Gospels, and Acts. Narrative is formatted to tell a story. Sometimes without comment on the morality of the actors, other times
2. **Law:** In the OT, the entire Pentateuch (first five books of Moses) are considered the Torah or Law. Most of the Torah is historical narrative, but within are nestled long sections of various laws for Israel. Traditionally, the OT law has been divided into three categories: Civil, Ceremonial, and Moral.
3. **Wisdom:** Wisdom literature engages the mind as it draws us to consider the complex issues of life. Poetry engages the heart, particularly in the Psalms, giving us a language of prayer, song, lament, celebration, and reflection. When studying the wisdom books (mostly Hebrew poetry in the OT), we must consider how the frequent use of imagery, repetition, and parallelism (A, what's more B) affects the meaning. (Consider Psalm 1.)
4. **Prophecy:** The prophetic books should be studied in their historical context. Much of prophecy is foretelling future events, particularly as it looks forward to the Messiah. However, most of prophecy is 'forthtelling' addressing the sins and problems of the people in a certain time, calling them to repentance and faith. Prophetic writing has unique language conventions, often very visual, and hyperbolic in presentation. Apocalyptic literature (Revelation and parts of Ezekiel and Daniel) is a kind of prophecy, often taking the form of visions and dreams to communicate hidden truths.
5. **Epistle:** When reading the genre of epistle (in the NT), we must remember that these letters were written to specific audiences dealing with specific circumstances (determining what they were helps with interpretation). In a real sense, we are both reading someone else's mail and God's Word to us. (Consider Paul's letter to the Galatians.)

Appreciate the great variety God gave us in his Word, for our good. Identify the type of writing of the book you are studying to better understand its context.

## 6. The Old Testament must be interpreted in light of fulfillment in Christ.

- **Interdependent:** We cannot fully understand the New Testament without the Old Testament and vice versa. It has been said, "The Old is in the New revealed; the New is in the Old concealed."
- **Christocentric:** The Old Testament is not just interesting history with some good moral lessons thrown in. It doesn't just provide examples to follow or theology to believe. It is the story of God's people that reaches its climax in the death and resurrection of the Messiah. We should follow the instruction and example of the New Testament authors and read the entire Old Testament in light of Christ.

**Luke 24:25-27** - *"And he said to them, 'O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! <sup>26</sup> Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?' <sup>27</sup> And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself."*

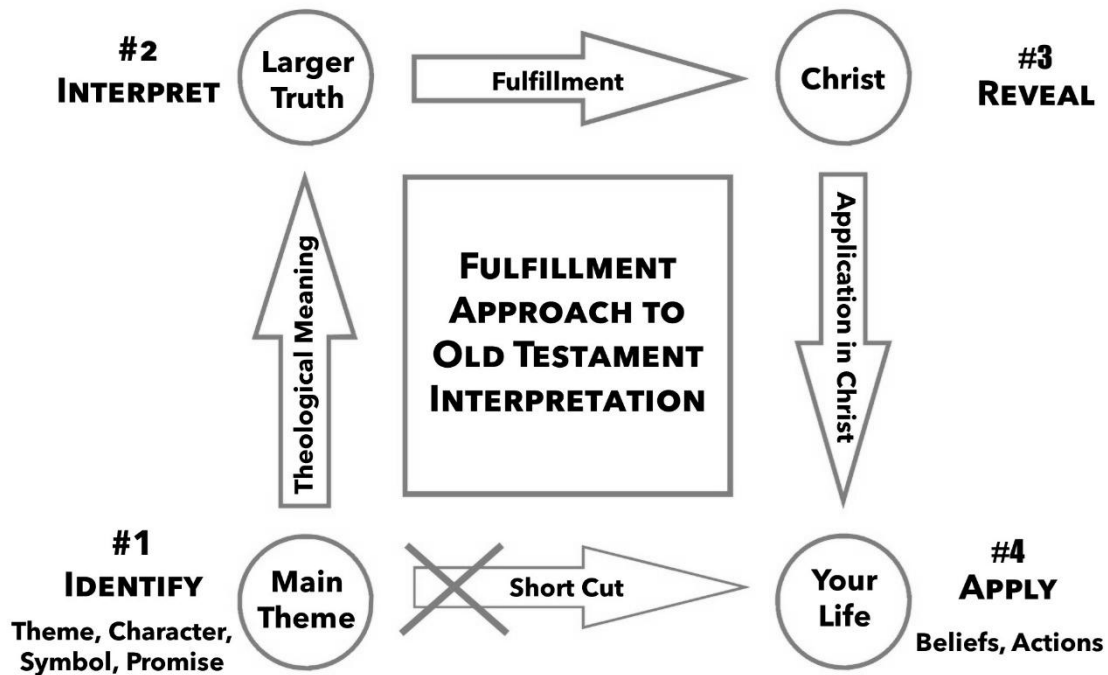
**Luke 24:44-47** - *"Then he said to them, 'These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.' <sup>45</sup> Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures,<sup>46</sup> and said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead...'"*

**Acts 26:22-23** - *"To this day I have had the help that comes from God, and so I stand here testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass: <sup>23</sup> that the Christ must suffer and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles."*

**Romans 15:4** - *"For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope." (also Acts 3:22-24, 1 Cor. 15:3-4, 2 Tim., I 1 Pet. 1:10-12)*

- Approaches to Interpreting the Old Testament

- **Exemplary Approach** - looks at the characters in the story for good examples to follow and bad examples to avoid.
- **Redemptive-Historical Approach** - reads the events of the story to see how they are part of God's plan to orchestrate history in his plan of redemption.
- **Systematic-Theology Approach** - reads the passage to learn theological truths about God, humanity, and salvation.
- **Fulfillment Approach** - looks for how the central themes, characters, and symbols foreshadow Christ and his saving work (see Luke 24:44-47).



## 7. Scripture must be interpreted under the Spirit's guidance in the context of Christian community.

- **Guidance:** The Bible must be studied with an open heart, eager for the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

**John 16:13** - *"When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come."* (also Luke 24:25)

**1 Corinthians 2:11-12** - *"For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God.<sup>12</sup> Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God."*

- **Community:** We should not try to interpret and apply the Bible in isolation. We should seek to humbly learn from the generations of believers that have come before us and those in our own community.

**Acts 8:30-31** - *"So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, 'Do you understand what you are reading?'<sup>31</sup> And he said, 'How can I, unless someone guides me?' And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him."*

**Act 18:26** - *"He began to speak boldly in the synagogue, but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him and explained to him the way of God more accurately."*

- **Transformation:** When, by God's grace, we properly read, study, interpret, and apply the Word of God, the Spirit can pierce our hearts and change our lives!

**Hebrews 4:12-13** - *"For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart."*

**1 Peter 2:2-3** - *Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation - <sup>3</sup> if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good."*



## Tools for Studying the Bible

**Study Bible:** There are many good study Bibles available. They can be a great tool to provide language help, historical background, and theological perspective. This can be a good way to do daily devotions. Make sure you read the top of the page before you read the bottom of the page! Consider the ESV Study Bible, Gospel Transformation Study Bible, or the Life Application Study Bible.

**Dictionary:** A simple dictionary or thesaurus can be very helpful with unfamiliar words and concepts.

**Bible Dictionary:** This resource is like a mini-encyclopedia and provides helpful historical, cultural, geographical and biblical background for a host of topics (i.e. people, cities, terms, etc.)

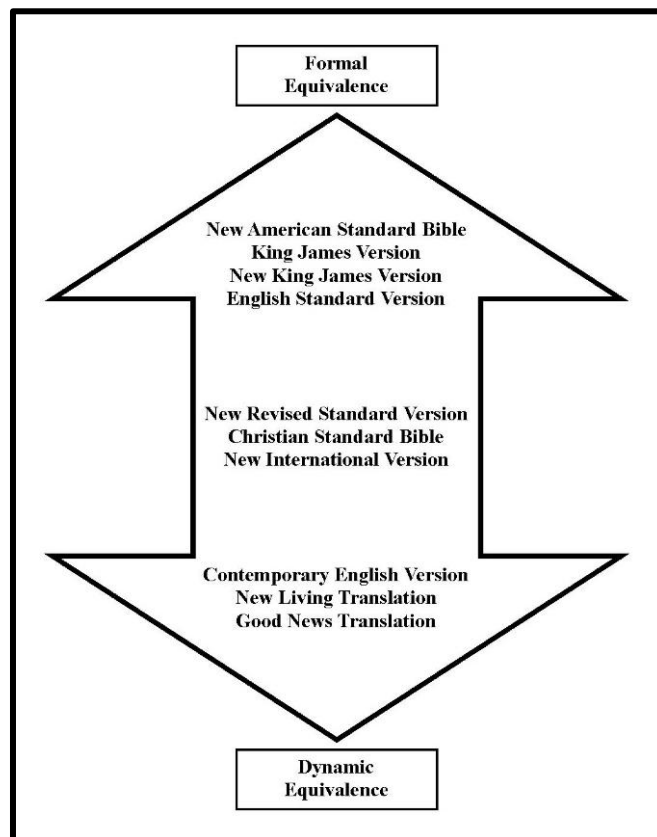
**Commentaries:** For more in depth study and teaching, commentaries pick-up where study Bibles leave off. Don't turn to a commentary too quickly. Make sure you study the passage first on your own. It is possible to rely too much on commentaries, but it is also possible to rely too little on them. If you have an interpretation for a passage that is not supported by any commentary, it is unlikely that you have discovered something no one else ever has. Don't try to be original! Consider the Abridged Expositors Bible Commentary, Layman's Bible Commentary or the Tyndale Bible Commentary.

**Various Translations:** Having various translations available is a crucial tool. Remember the Old Testament was written in Hebrew and the New Testament in Greek. All modern translations are based on an "eclectic text" which is a compilation of the most accurate and reliable manuscripts. Every translation involves some interpretation. No translation gets it perfect all the time. There are two basic approaches to translation:

- **Formal Equivalence:** This word-for-word philosophy follows closely to the grammatical and vocabulary structures of the original language. It seeks to do less interpretation and puts more in the hands of the reader.
- **Dynamic Equivalence:** This thought-for-thought philosophy follows the referential structures, i.e. meaning and content. It seeks to give the reader more clarity and help in interpretation.

## English Versions

- **King James Version** - word-for-word; 12<sup>th</sup> grade reading level; 54 translators; published in 1611.
- **New American Standard Bible** - word-for-word (revision of ASB); 11<sup>th</sup> grade reading level; 54 translators; published in 1971, updated in 1995.
- **Good News Translation** - dynamic equivalence; 6<sup>th</sup> grade reading; 7 translators; published in 1976.
- **New International Version** - balance between formal and dynamic; 8<sup>th</sup> grade reading level; 115 translators; published in 1978.
- **New King James Version** - word-for-word (update of KJV); 9<sup>th</sup> grade reading level; 119 translators; published in 1982.
- **New Revised Standard Version** - balance between formal and dynamic (liberal revision of RSV); 10<sup>th</sup> grade reading level; 30 translators; published in 1990.
- **Contemporary English Version** - dynamic equivalence; 5<sup>th</sup> grade reading level; over 100 translators; published in 1995.
- **New Living Translation** - dynamic equivalence (changed LT from a paraphrase); 6<sup>th</sup> grade reading level; 90 translators; published in 1996.
- **English Standard Version** - word-for-word (based-off RSV); 8<sup>th</sup> grade reading level; over 100 translators, published in 2001.
- **Christian Standard Bible** - optimal equivalence (update from the HCSB); 7<sup>th</sup> grade reading level; over 100 translators, published in 2017.



# Practice Studying the Bible

## Personal Study: Observation

- Carefully read the section of the Bible you are studying making important Observations on the manuscript.
  - *Genre* - What is the genre (narrative, history, poetry, prophecy, letter, etc.)
  - *Structure* - How is the passage structured? What comes first? Last?
  - *Grammar* - Pay attention to grammar. What are the main subjects and verbs? What adjectives and descriptors are used?
  - *Repetition* - Are there any repeated words, concepts, or themes?
  - *Transitions* - Pay attention to transition words and connections (such as therefore, because, so that, etc.)
  - *Contrast* - Are there ideas that the reader is intended to compare and contrast? Are there opposites being represented?
- Highlight repeated themes, underline important terms, draw arrows between related concepts, etc.
- Write down important Observations on the worksheet, and begin making some initial Interpretations.
- Put complicated words and concepts in your own terms. Look at different translations. Use a dictionary if needed.
- What unresolved questions do you have from this passage?

## Small Group Discussion: Interpretation

- Review important Observations that you made in your personal study and work through Interpreting the meaning of the text. Continue marking up the manuscript and filling in the worksheet.
- Interpretation often starts with asking questions about your Observations. Why is a particular theme or word repeated? How do the important concepts relate together? What is the meaning of the specific vocabulary used? What was the author's purpose? Are there Old Testament passages being alluded to?
- Consider the literary context. Understand words as a part of the sentence. Understand sentences as a part of the paragraph. Understand paragraphs as a part of the larger section.
- Consider the historical context (author and audience): What assumptions has the author made? What was going on that caused this to be written? What is he addressing in the life of the first audience?
- Try to answer any questions people had in their personal study.
- Do your best to make all of your Interpretations based on the book of the Bible we are studying. While looking at other related passages in other parts of the Bible can provide background and reinforcement, sometimes it can actually skew your Interpretation of the author's meaning.

### Small Group Discussion: Main Point

- Summarize key Observations and Interpretations made at your table.
- What unresolved questions from the text did you have? Did other groups find any answers?
- Using the significant concepts we've seen, develop the Main Point of this section. A Main Point is more than a summary. It explains not just what was said, but why.
- Write out the Main Point on your worksheet.

### Personal Reflection: Application

- Discuss how the Main Point should be applied to your life. See "Basic Bible Study Skills" by Peter Krol & Kenny Carrington. [www.knowableword.com](http://www.knowableword.com)
  - *Inward* - How does this passage apply to you personally? How is it calling you to become more like Christ?
  - *Outward* - How does this passage impact that way you interact with and influence those around you? How can you lead others to Christ?
- Look at different ways this passage can change you:
  - *Your Head* - How does this impact what you think and believe?
  - *Your Heart* - How does this impact your understanding of who you are (character, values, thoughts, priorities, identity, etc.)?
  - *Your Hands* - How does this impact what you do and say?
- Move beyond general principles to specific application in your relationships and circumstances.
- Don't forget to make Jesus a part of your application! How does the Gospel and God's grace impact what this passage is calling you to think, believe, change, or do? How does Jesus and his work fulfill this passage?
- Before you are done, spend a few minutes in prayer to ask God to make these changes in you.

## Manuscript Study Worksheet

Observation - 1 Peter 1:22-25	Interpretation	
<p>“Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; for <i>‘All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever.’</i> (Isa 40:6, 8) And this word is the good news that was preached to you.”</p>		
<b>Main Point</b>		
	Inward Application	Outward Application
Head		
Heart		
Hands		