

## Right and Wrong Ways to Do Bible Study

There are sound methods when it comes to studying Scripture. One of these is to recognize that text must be compared with text — rather like joining or connecting the dots on those children’s drawings. The rabbis actually had a name for this “connecting the dots” technique. They called it *Gezara Shawa*, or “analogy.” This means that we are to connect passages which have similar words. They knew that the mind of God across Scripture has to be understood on the basis of successfully linking various parts of the Bible, intelligently. A similar word in one context recalls another passage with similar language. They are to be interpreted together — the one helping to explain the other.

Take a classic example. Jesus used Daniel as a reference point in his lecture or discourse on the end of the age and the events leading up to his return to the earth (the Olivet Discourse of Matthew 24, Mark 13 and Luke 21). We know for certain that Jesus wanted us to connect Daniel to his own words about the future. Jesus said: “When you see the abomination of desolation referred to by Daniel standing in a holy place” (Matt. 24:15) or “standing where he ought not to” (Mark 13:14: note how the RV corrected the error of the KJV in overlooking the masculine pronoun here), “those who are in Judea should flee...” Jesus added a special warning about this reference to Daniel and the abomination: “let the reader understand this.”

The abomination of desolation is not something we have to imagine or invent, such as a vague generalization about apostasy. Nor was it the Roman army surrounding Jerusalem in the first century. The Church of the first century actually fled about four years before Jerusalem was taken over. No, it was the abomination of desolation described, Jesus said, by Daniel. To connect the dots, then, we go to Daniel and we find the exact expression “abomination of desolation” in 11:31 where a wicked King of the North sets up the abomination of desolation in a temple fortress. Directly linked to that precious verse is Daniel 12:11 which provides indispensable information relative to the chronology of the abomination of desolation.

Daniel, in a sort of debriefing session with the interpreting angel, is told in Daniel 12:7, 11 that 1290 days will elapse from the setting up of the abomination of desolation until the “end of all these things” — which includes, note well, the resurrection of the dead in Daniel 12:2.

Putting the pieces of the puzzle together and connecting as Jesus instructed, we form a picture of the final days of the present age, when the Kingdom of God will replace “this age” with the age to come of God’s rule on a renewed earth.

Another significant joining of the dots is required by Jesus’ reference, in the same context as he quotes Daniel (Matt. 24:15), to “a great tribulation such as has never happened since the beginning of the world and will never so happen again” (Matt. 24:21). That statement of Jesus is a verbatim quotation of Daniel 12:1, not surprising since we know that Jesus had Daniel 11:31 and 12:11 (and 9:27) in mind in Matthew 24:15. Now in Matthew 24:21 Jesus says, “Then there will be a great tribulation such as has never happened and never will happen again.” The quotation is exactly what Daniel wrote in Daniel 12:1. This connection should on no account be broken. To disregard the connection and to suppose that Jesus did not have Daniel 12:1 in mind is to lose track of prophetic truth.

The significance of Jesus' exact citation of Daniel 12:1, and in a context where we know he specifically had Daniel in mind, is this: The great tribulation in Daniel 12:1 is a brief burst of unparalleled agony during the career of the final king of the north and it ends with the demise of that wicked antichristian figure. The resurrection of the dead is also closely connected. It would then constitute a considerable misunderstanding to divorce Jesus' "great tribulation" from the one described in Daniel 12:1 in exactly the same words.

On this rather simple point whole systems of prophecy stand or fall. When Jesus referred to the unequalled time of distress he was describing a brief agony still destined to afflict the world. He was not talking about an extended period from AD 70 onwards for centuries. Common sense comes to our aid here also. Mark says that "those days [of extreme tribulation] will be such days as have not happened since the beginning of the creation until now and will never so happen again...Woe to those who are pregnant in those days!" (Mark 13:19, 17). I think you will understand that Jesus cannot possibly have in mind an extended time of nearly 2000 years (twice the length of the millennium!). Here now is the vital point to be noted: Matthew and Mark deliberately say that "immediately after the tribulation of those days" (Matt. 24:29) or "in those days after that tribulation" (Mark 13:24), the sun will be darkened and the return of Christ will be visible to all. At that time the elect, the international body of believers, will be gathered from across the world.

Commentary is littered with attempts to avoid the obvious here, namely that the great tribulation of Daniel and Jesus is a short period of agony yet in the future. That time of extreme danger and disaster is associated with the arrival of a final antichrist who sits in the holy place (or perhaps puts his image there). Jesus, Paul added, will destroy that single individual, "the wicked one" (see LXX of Isa. 11:4 as quoted in 2 Thess. 2:8). He is called by Isaiah and Micah the Assyrian, strongly pointing to a figure located in that geographical area.

The connecting of 2 Thessalonians 2:8 with Isaiah 11:4 is revealing indeed. And that "joining of the dots" reveals much about the future.

### **How Not to Do Bible Study**

You start with an idea you have learned perhaps in church. You then pick a verse which seems to support your idea, and you resolutely avoid evidence which might call your idea into question, that is, might explode your idea as unbiblical and untrue.

Here is a good example. Suppose you believe that at death we depart consciously as disembodied spirits or souls to heaven or hell. Ecclesiastes 12:7 is reassuring for this point of view: "Then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it." But this procedure is fatally flawed. You have begun at the wrong end of the book of Ecclesiastes, instead of learning from earlier clear statements. Such neglect has a penalty. Because you refuse to hear the earlier words of Ecclesiastes you are consigned to the penalty of misunderstanding 12:7. If, however, you proceed in order, from beginning to end, you will have encountered this about what happens when we die: "For the living know that they will die" (that is clear enough!). Now this: "**But the dead do not know anything**, nor have they any longer a reward, for their memory is forgotten" (Ecc. 9:5). Do Bible readers hear that? "The dead know nothing at all." Is that clear? In case we missed it, only five verses later we learn: "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for there is **no activity or**

**planning or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol** [the place of all the dead] where you are going” (Ecc. 9:10).

So much then for the idea that “the spirit returning to God who gave it” as a proof of the very opposite of what Ecclesiastes had already plainly taught. The spirit of course is the life-energy which drives us when we are alive. It returns to God. If that is supposed to mean that *you*, the person, *return* to God, it is doubly false. You were not with God before you were born!

The Bible should be read in order, and with an open mind. “The dead know nothing at all. There is no activity in Sheol where you are going.” Such texts are beyond any possible misunderstanding. When you are dead, you are truly dead, unconscious, aware of nothing. So the Bible teaches, unless of course we use a “backwards” method and start with Ecclesiastes 12:7 and turn a blind eye towards 9:5, 10 and hosts of other texts.

### **Defining the Gospel**

It is a puzzling fact that many who read the Bible abandon the simple rules of interpretation which they successfully apply to all other documents. They seem to forget the basic laws of communication which govern all written and spoken material. One of the most fundamental of these laws, which under normal circumstances we all apply unconsciously, is the “law of synonymous terms.” A narrative which introduces the word “automobile” may continue to refer to the same subject under varied terms. When the word “car” appears, or even “vehicle” or perhaps even “jalopy,” readers are not confused. They understand that these are words to describe the same thing. A synonymous expression may be simply an abbreviation. “The United States of America” may appear as “the United States,” “the States,” “the U.S.” or “America.” No one is disturbed by such use of alternative terms for the same thing. A letter which introduced its subject as “the wedding of Tom and Jenny” will later refer to the same event as “the wedding.” These are just plain, easy facts about all communication. If I say, “Tomorrow is my birthday, and when we go on our picnic...” you have no difficulty in seeing that the picnic is a birthday outing.

When it comes to the Bible, however, many forget these primary laws of language. An amazing miracle of misunderstanding occurs, affecting the heart of the Christian faith. Readers of Scripture seem unable to make the connection between different expressions for the same object. This failure to connect synonymous terms causes them to lose track of vital, revealing information about the Gospel itself. Let us illustrate our point.

### **The Primary Definitions of the Gospel**

In Matthew 13:19, the Gospel Message brought by Jesus is defined as “the **message about the Kingdom,**” i.e., “**the Kingdom of God,**” since that is the full title of the Gospel as Matthew had earlier told us in 4:17. In the very next verses (Matt. 13:20-23) this “**message about the Kingdom**” is abbreviated to “**the message.**” This happens five times in the four following verses. The original phrase “**message of the Kingdom**” is shortened to simply “**the message.**” But we are expected to make the connection correctly. It would be very foolish to deny that “**the message of the Kingdom**” of Matthew 13:19 is something different when it is described as “**the message**” in the next four verses. Clearly “**the message**” is “**the message about the Kingdom.**”

This simple piece of information has a dramatic effect on how we read the rest of the New Testament. The same Gospel Message appears under different “labels,” all of which, however, should be referred back to the basic definition of the Gospel provided by Jesus himself. When these interlocking connections are disregarded, the Gospel easily becomes detached from Jesus, the author (as God’s representative) of the Gospel Message. Detachment of the Gospel from Jesus’ own preaching is a theological disaster everywhere evident in contemporary invitations to salvation.

Here again is Jesus’ description of the Gospel Message, recorded by Matthew. We have no difficulty equating **“the message about the Kingdom”** with **“the message.”** The Message is simply a “shorthand” version of **“the message about the Kingdom”**:

“When anyone hears the **message about the Kingdom** and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart...As for the one on whom seed was sown on rocky places, this is the man who hears **the message** and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no firm root in himself, but is only temporary, and when affliction or persecution arises because of **the message**, immediately he falls away. And the one on whom the seed was sown among the thorns, this is the man who hears **the message**, and the worry of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke **the message** and it becomes unfruitful. And the one on whom seed was sown on the good soil, this is the man who hears **the message** and understands it; who indeed bears fruit and brings forth, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty” (Matt. 13:19-23).

When Luke records the same parable he employs exactly the same “shorthand” technique. In Luke 8:11 “the seed [sown by the sower] is **the message of God,**” but in verses 12, 13, 15 it appears as **“the message.”** No one, however, would argue that it was no longer **“the message of God.”** Nor should we forget what Matthew taught us: that it is **“the message about the Kingdom of God.”**

If we extend our examination of Gospel synonyms over a wider span, we shall find that the law of equivalent phrases works to clarify and expand our understanding. Thus Matthew’s **“message of the Kingdom”** (Matt. 13:19) reappears in a later chapter as **“the Gospel of the Kingdom”** which is to be “preached in the whole world” (Matt. 24:14). This variant expression allows us immediately to make another connection. **“The Gospel of the Kingdom”** is the same exactly as **the message of the Kingdom.**” But both expressions often appear, in the gospels as well as the rest of the New Testament, abbreviated as simply **“the message”** or **“the Gospel.”**

The Christian Message may alternatively be called the **“Gospel of God.”** This expression tells us something vitally important about the origin of the Gospel. It comes from God and so it is a divine message. Mark introduces the Gospel as the “the Gospel of God” and in the next breath he defines what he means. It is **“the Gospel about the Kingdom.”** We make the obvious connection as we read Mark 1:14, 15: “Jesus came into Galilee proclaiming the **Gospel of God** and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled and the **Kingdom of God** is at hand. Repent and believe the Gospel.’” What Gospel? **The Gospel of God.** And what is that Gospel about? It is **“the Gospel about the Kingdom of God.”**

We have already discovered the same truth in Matthew’s account. Further confirmation about the content of the Gospel appears earlier in Matthew. He reported Jesus’ ministry in these words: “Jesus was going throughout all Galilee teaching in their synagogues and preaching **the Gospel about the Kingdom**” (Matt. 4:23; 9:35).

Jesus and the Gospel writers, being excellent teachers and wanting to be sure that we do not fail to grasp the saving Message, keep telling us what the Gospel is. They carefully introduce us to the basic Christian vocabulary, just as we introduce children to the words they need to use as the basic tools of communication. Matthew says that Jesus went about “**preaching the Gospel about the Kingdom.**” Mark summarizes the content of Jesus’ preaching about the Kingdom as the “**the Gospel of God**” (Mark 1:14, 15). In his version of the parable we examined above, Mark later abbreviates the **Gospel of the Kingdom** and calls it, like Luke, “**the message**” (Mark 2:2; 4:14-20, 33). Matthew, as we saw, gives the same “shorthand” expression, calling the **Gospel** “**the message.**” In this way the narratives of the life of Jesus set up a network of interconnected synonyms, equivalent phrases all pointing to the same central idea — **the Gospel concerning the Kingdom of God.**

The three accounts of Jesus’ parable of the sower furnish us with an indispensable key to understanding the Christian faith. What Matthew calls “**the message about the Kingdom**” (Matt. 13:19), Luke calls “**the message of God**” (Luke 8:11) and Mark simply “**the message**” (Mark 4:14). These are interchangeable names for the one saving Gospel — **the Gospel about the Kingdom of God**, the Christian Gospel. “**Message**” (“word”) and “**Gospel**” are synonymous terms, giving “**the Message about the Kingdom,**” “**the Gospel about the Kingdom,**” “the Message of God,” “the Gospel of God,” “the Message” and “the Gospel.”

Throughout the accounts of Jesus’ ministry we find confirmation of the “law of synonymous expression.” Thus, for example, Matthew reports Jesus as saying: “**This Gospel about the Kingdom of God** will be preached in all the world as a **witness**” (Matt. 24:14). Mark records the same saying by writing that “**this Gospel** will be preached” (Mark 13:10). Later Matthew refers to the Gospel as simply “this Gospel” (Matt. 26:13) and Mark writes “**the Gospel**” (Mark 14:9).

Our study reveals that the Christian Gospel has a name: It is **the Gospel (or Message) about the Kingdom of God**, known alternatively as **God’s Gospel** or simply **the Gospel (or Message)**.

A major confusion arises in the minds of Bible readers when they encounter yet another name for the Gospel: “**The Gospel of Christ.**” Does this mean the Gospel preached by Christ or the Message preached about Christ? Many instinctively opt for the second alternative only, forgetting that **the Gospel of the Kingdom, Christ’s Gospel**, is the foundation of all biblical preaching (Heb. 2:3). A major error of interpretation occurs when the primary definition of the Gospel from the lips of Jesus is forgotten. When the proper connections are made, however, there can be no doubt what the **Gospel of Christ** is: It is “**the Message/Gospel about the Kingdom of God**” (Matt. 13:19; 4:23; 9:35; 24:14), the Message preached by Christ. This is not to deny that the Gospel is also about Christ — his death and his resurrection. *However, the foundation of the Gospel was laid by Jesus in his preaching about the Kingdom, long before he said a word about his death and resurrection.*

Christ’s Gospel, according to the documents describing his ministry, was the Gospel about the Kingdom, which is also God’s Message. God is the originator of the Gospel Message (the Gospel of God); Christ is the one who preached it (the Gospel of Christ). The subject matter of the Gospel is the Kingdom of God (the Gospel of the Kingdom). These phrases may be compressed as “**the Gospel,**” but we must never forget its full title as **God’s and Christ’s Gospel Message about the Kingdom of God.**

Every time **“the message”** is preached or received in the book of Acts, it is essential that we remind ourselves of the content of that Message. Otherwise we are in danger of failing to connect synonymous phrases and precious information is thrown away. Luke is careful to maintain in the book of Acts the same basic gospel terminology he established in his first book (the gospel of Luke). Thus in Acts 6:4, the Apostles devote themselves **“to prayer and the service of the message.”** **“Those who were scattered went about preaching the message”** (8:4), which is exactly the same as **“preaching Christ”** (8:5). What was involved in this activity? The answer appears in Acts 8:12: **“When they believed Philip as he preached the Good News [Gospel] about the Kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were being baptized, both men and women.”** Luke then reports that those who so believed had **“received the message”** (Acts 8:14). What message? The Message about

The pattern of preaching is exactly what we saw demonstrated by Jesus’ own ministry as preacher of the Kingdom. Jesus, in fact, after his resurrection, continued the proclamation of the Kingdom of God Gospel through his Apostles. The new facts about his death and resurrection were incorporated into the Gospel of the Kingdom. This confirmed the hope that the Kingdom of God would eventually appear.

Let us summarize what we have found so far. The Gospel which Jesus preached for our salvation is the Gospel about the Kingdom of God. Jesus stated that the entire reason why God commissioned him was to preach the Kingdom: **“I must proclaim the Gospel of the Kingdom in the other cities also; that is the reason for which I was sent”** (Luke 4:43). In the very next verse (Luke 5:1) we learn that people crowded round Jesus to hear **“the message (word).”** The following equations are crystal clear:

**The Gospel about the Kingdom of God = the Gospel of God = the Message of the Kingdom = the Message of God = the Message.**

### **Paul’s Gospel**

In Paul’s letters the vocabulary is the same. In his earliest writing Paul represents his converts as **“imitators of us and the Lord”** because they had **“received the message”** (1 Thess. 1:6) that **“God was calling them into His own Kingdom”** (1 Thess. 2:12). He urged his converts to be **“worthy of the Kingdom of God”** (2 Thess. 1:5). Paul never deviated from his practice of presenting the **Message about the Kingdom**. Nearing his death, he urged Timothy to continue to **“preach the message”** (2 Tim. 4:2) in view of **“Jesus’ appearing and Kingdom”** (v. 1). Once again the Message and the Kingdom are inseparably linked. Paul has faithfully preached the same Gospel as Jesus.

Across the pages of the New Testament one message unites Jesus’ and the Apostles’ preaching: It is the **Message about the Kingdom of God**. This is the **“Gospel of God.”** As we have seen, Jesus opened his ministry with this Message (Mark 1:14, 15). **“The Gospel of God”** is the name of the Message proclaimed also by Paul (Rom. 1:1; 15:16, 2 Cor. 11:7; 1 Thess. 2:2, 8, 9) and equally by Peter (1 Pet. 4:17). The same Message came from the lips of Jesus (Luke 8:11) and later from the Apostles: **“they spoke the message of God with boldness”** (Acts 4:31).

Other synonymous terms describe the same Gospel Message as **“the word of hearing”** (1 Thess. 2:13; Heb. 4:2), emphasizing the method of communication by which the Gospel was spread and the critical need for us to hear and understand. It is **“the message of (the) truth”** (2 Tim. 2:15). In Ephesians 1:13 the saving Message is called **“the message of (the) truth, the Gospel of your salvation,”** because of

its ability to dispel all the lying, counterfeit gospels of the Devil. The same Message is **“the message of life”** (Phil. 2:16) because by receiving it we may gain life and immortality from God in the coming Kingdom. “Life” is itself a synonym for the Kingdom of God (Matt. 19:17, 23; Rom. 5:17).

It is **“the message of salvation”** (Acts 13:26), because it alone is able to rescue us from death. And it is also **“the message of reconciliation”** (2 Cor. 5:19) because it brings about a reconciliation between God and man. It is the **“Gospel of grace”** (Acts 20:24) because God’s plan to set up the Kingdom (v. 25) is His gracious act in favor of those who obey Him. Finally it includes **“the message of the cross”** (1 Cor. 1:18) because the death of Jesus for mankind ratifies the New Contract (Covenant) and makes possible his future establishment of the Kingdom. The fundamental content of this Message is **“the Good News about the Kingdom”** (Mark 1:14, 15; Luke 4:43; 8:1; 9:2, 11, 60; Matt. 3:2; 4:17, 23; 9:35; 24:14; Acts 8:12; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31). This is Christ’s own Gospel, the **Gospel of Christ**, the special revelation of grace (Acts 20:24) granted by God who declares His purpose to establish the Kingdom of God on earth. As Paul preached the **Gospel of grace** (Acts 20:24) he was proclaiming **the Kingdom** (v. 25). *There is no difference whatever between the Gospel of grace and the proclamation of the Kingdom (Acts 20:24, 25).* In the book of Revelation the Gospel is called **“the Gospel of the coming age,”** mistranslated in our versions as **“the eternal Gospel”** (Rev. 14:6).

A moment’s reflection reveals that the Bible’s constant name for the Gospel is **“the Gospel about the Kingdom.”** All the other synonymous titles for the Gospel should be referred back to the “parent texts” in Mark 1:14, 15, Matthew 4:23 and Luke 4:43, the key to the definition of God’s saving Message.

**“Jesus came into Galilee proclaiming God’s Gospel and saying, ‘Repent because the Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe the Gospel’”** (Mark 1:14, 15).

**“Jesus went about all Galilee teaching in their synagogues, preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom”** (Matt. 4:23; 9:35).

**“I must preach the Gospel of the Kingdom in the other cities also: that is the reason for which I was sent”** (Luke 4:43).

There is an urgent need for the biblical label for the Gospel to be taught everywhere since the **“Gospel of the Kingdom,”** amazingly, is a phrase seldom, if ever, now heard on the lips of modern evangelists. In this they betray their departure from the preaching of Jesus. The absence of the phrase **“Gospel about the Kingdom”** is all the more alarming since Jesus’ first command to the potential convert was **“Repent and believe in the Gospel about the Kingdom of God”** (see Mark 1:14, 15). That’s where Christian conversion, rebirth and discipleship begin.

*New Testament Christianity is based on Christ’s teaching.* This is a simple fact frequently overlooked. John considered this lesson one of the most important to be driven home to his disciples. He warned that **“Anyone who in the name of progress does not abide in Christ’s teaching has no grasp of God”** (2 John 9). Christ’s teaching is summarized under the heading **the Gospel Message about the Kingdom of God** (Matt. 13:19; Mark 1:14, 15; Luke 4:43, etc.). It is that Message which, according to Jesus, must take firm root as the seed of immortality sown in the heart of the believer. The Devil understands this (perhaps better than many contemporary preachers). Luke’s warning is clear: **“Whenever anyone hears the message [about the Kingdom, Matt. 13:19], the Devil comes and snatches away what was**

sown in his heart, **so that he may not believe and be saved**” (Luke 8:12). In Christianity salvation depends on hearing, understanding and acting upon the Gospel about the Kingdom of God — hearing, **believing and obeying it. Christians according to Jesus’ definition are** “disciples of the Kingdom” (Matt. 13:52) and **“sons destined for the Kingdom”** (Matt. 13:38). Jewish scholars (scribes) who become Christians are those who are “trained in the Kingdom message” (Matt. 13:52).

Once they have understood the Kingdom, Christians are meant to pass on the Gospel about the Kingdom to others far and wide (see the urgency of the task in Luke 9:60). They are committed to following the Church’s “marching orders” to go into the whole world and preach and teach everything Jesus taught, summarized as the **Gospel of the Kingdom**. The practice of Jesus and Paul is identical when it comes to their evangelistic activity:

“Jesus welcomed them and began speaking about the Kingdom of God” (Luke 9:11).

“For two whole years Paul welcomed all who came to see him. Boldly and without hindrance he preached the Kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 28:30, 31).

How well are you complying with Jesus’ orders?

## **The Gospel in John**

What about John? Does he record that Jesus preached the Kingdom? Here an important principle comes into play. We have seen how the New Testament describes the same Gospel **under different terms**.

How does John speak of Jesus’ preaching? To answer this question we must recall a statement of Jesus recorded by Matthew: **“This Gospel of the Kingdom** must be proclaimed among all the nations as a witness” (Matt. 24:14). The Gospel may be referred to as **a witness** or testimony, and that is one of the ways John refers to Jesus’ preaching of the Kingdom. In John 3:11 Jesus complained that people did “not receive our testimony [witness].” According to Jesus John the Baptist also “testified to the truth” (John 5:33). John proclaimed the Kingdom of God (Matt. 3:2). Jesus mentioned this “so that they might be saved” (John 5:34). Elsewhere very frequently John the Apostle calls Jesus’ preaching his **“word,” “words”** or **“teaching.”** These are all synonyms for the **Gospel of the Kingdom**.

These equivalent phrases will help you to make good sense of the New Testament and of the Christian faith: Kingdom of God = eternal life. Truth = Gospel (James 1:18; Eph. 1:14, 15). Spirit of Truth (John 14:17; 15:26; John 16:13; 1 John 4:6) = Spirit of the Gospel (see Eph. 1:13; 3:6). Gospel = Gospel about the Kingdom of God (Matt. 3:2; 4:17, 23; 9:35; 24:14). Word of God = Gospel of the Kingdom (Jesus’ parable of the sower as recorded by Matthew, Mark and Luke).

How well has the Church been following the information given by these biblical phrases?