

THE COMPASS
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FUTURE TENSE? Figuring Out God's Will

Part 3:

Please Disregard Previous Message

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When you talk to me, you pretty much assume I can understand what you're saying, right?

I know I make that assumption when I talk to you.

So if I give a plain ordinary word, straight out of the English language, you can probably tell me what I'm talking about, right?

For example — if I say the word *crown*.

You recognize that I'm talking about the gold thing a king wears on his head, right?

Nope.

OK, then, I must be using the term formally, referring to the royals — like *I'm loyal to the Crown*.

No?

OK, then, I must be using it as a verb — as in *They will crown him king*. Right?

Nope.

OK then, I'm talking about the top of something, the highest part of something — like the crown of a hill.

Nope.

What about a sports award — like when a boxer wins the world heavyweight crown?

Nope.

Well then, I must be referring to the old silver coin — the British crown, worth five shillings, or 25 pence.

Negative.

Well, a landscaper talks about the crown of a tree, a hatter talks about the crown of a hat, a jeweler talks about the crown of a diamond.

A sailor uses *crown* to talk about the design of an anchor.

A printer uses *crown* to talk about a size of paper.

No?

Maybe I'm talking about bringing an event to its conclusion — like *They crowned the conference with a big reception*.

Wrong again? Aaugh!

How about going medical? In childbirth, the doctor says the baby is "crowning" — which is the point where I pass out.

No? Oh, wait! My tooth! My tooth hurts! I need a new crown!

No?

Maybe I'm so frustrated with this little exercise that you're ready to crown me — konk me on the head!

Language is, by its very nature, imprecise.

One word can have 20 different means — and then on the other hand, in some cases a single concept can be described by using 20 different words.

For example: what's a group? Well, that depends on how you want to think about it. Is it a set, a batch, a bracket, a type, a sort, a kind?

Is it a variety? A family? A breed, a grade, a rank? Is it a crowd, a company, a cluster, a congregation?

Is this a pack we're talking about? A gang, a bunch, a troop, a flock, a faction, a party?

Is this group a circle, a clique, a camp, a caucus, a collection, a congregation?

Is it a society? A ring? An assembly? A gathering?

We think in terms of being able to be very, very specific by “choosing our words carefully,” and we often find that in legal arrangements, our contracts are pages and pages long, because it takes so many words to say exactly what we mean.

And even then there are debates about the fine print — What did you really say? What did you really mean?

One of the side-effects of living as imperfect human beings in an imperfect world is that we speak imperfect languages.

How do I figure out what kind of group you're talking about?

How do you figure out what kind of group I'm talking about?

We interpret.

We do this in every conversation we engage in, whether we realize it or not.

We analyze the word being used, and we analyze the *context* of the word — we look at the words and meanings *around* the word — and we calculate the meaning of the word accordingly.

The #1 rule of interpretation is: “Context is king.”

This is exactly the same process that we use when we read the Scriptures, and try to figure out God's design for our lives.

If I want to know God's will — what his heart longs for — how he designed me to live most effectively — then I have a tremendous tool in the Scriptures.

I've got about 1,600 pages of what we call “God's Word.”

This whole concept of the “Word of God” can get kind of confusing and sometimes controversial.

God is the author of the Bible — but he used imperfect vessels, ordinary human beings, to write it.

It's a total of 66 books written over 1,500 years on three different continents by 40 authors coming from widely varying walks of life.

Some say this inevitably means there are going to be problems — imperfections — in the text.

Others say no, it's a miracle — it's literally true, every single word.

But then still others look at the problems of translation, going from language to language to language down through the centuries — and they ask, How can we be literally, absolutely sure that every word here is literally, absolutely true?

It's like the conflict we have in our country over our Supreme Court.

The Supreme Court Justices' job is to interpret the Constitution. But how do they do that job? This is a matter of huge debate — because the outcome is life-changing.

In the old days — in fact for about the first century and a half of our nation's existence — the court used what is often referred to as the “grammatical-historical method” of interpretation.

This means the Justices worked at deciphering the original intent of the Constitution's authors — those guys we call the “founding fathers.”

The Justices would interpret the Constitution on the basis of what they perceived to be the intent of the founders.

But there were problems with this approach — like, for example, many of the guys who participated in the original Constitutional Convention were slave-owners; they wrote into the original Constitution a statement that slaves were less than equal to free men — and they left women out entirely.

After our Civil War, when the slaves were freed and equality was at least technically declared, this idea of the “intent of the founders” came under fire.

At the turn of the century, Theodore Roosevelt nominated Oliver Wendell Holmes to the Supreme Court, and Holmes pushed way in the other direction.

He said the constitution was in effect a living organism, and had to be interpreted through experience — and that judges in effect had to make up the law as they went.

(I'm paraphrasing here; sorry if I've offended any big Oliver Wendell Holmes fans.)

But suffice it to say, people on one side of this divide and people on the other side of this divide make each other froth at the mouth.

The same sort of argument emerges over how to interpret the Bible.

Some say the Bible is the very breath of God, inspired by his Holy Spirit, so we've got to stay with the “grammatical-historical” method of interpretation.

We have to limit our understandings to the author's original intent, word for word, detail for detail.

Others say the Bible is rendered in these dopey old human languages, by dopey old human beings, so it's diluted by human understanding and misunderstanding.

They say we have to take these factors into account, which means we have to be more liberal in our interpretation of the Bible's messages.

What's the truth?

Well, we can say for sure that it's a leap of faith to believe the Bible is the actual Word of God.

To say anything else would be dishonest.

It's an issue of faith.

There's a lot of evidence to support the belief that it's the actual Word of God — but the bottom line is, I have to decide what I believe.

God doesn't force me to accept him, nor does he force me to accept his Word.

There's evidence, but there's no undeniable proof.

As in every aspect of our spiritual journey, we have to walk on the evidence, not the assurance: faith is **“the evidence of things not seen,” Hebrews 11:1** says — so we walk by faith.

If I have doubts about whether the Bible is really the Word of God, I can consider the evidence.

History is pretty clear about how Jesus viewed the Old Testament, and employed it — we see this in **Matthew 5:18**.

I can look at what the Bible says about itself: that it's "**God-breathed**" (**2 Timothy 3:16**), and that the people who wrote it "**spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit**" (**2 Peter 1:21**) — this is the image of a sailboat being carried by the wind.

I can also look at the predictions that the Bible has made — hundreds of them. I can see from history that so many of these predictions came true that it would be really hard to say it was all a coincidence.

I can look at the testimony of people who have followed the Bible.

And it's because of all this evidence that orthodox Christians for the last 2,000-plus years have built their lives on the idea that the Bible is God's Word, and that the original manuscripts were without error.

Here again, it's ultimately a matter of faith, because we don't have any of the original manuscripts.

We have hundreds of copies dating back to within 100 years of the original writings — but none of the originals still exist.

So did God really preserve his word for us?

Is what we have today an accurate copy?

I have to decide for myself; you have to decide for yourself.

And how I decide impacts everything about my faith.

Either I accept the Bible as true — in which case I live life according to its teachings — or I decide the Bible contains error and I either completely ignore it or I pick and choose which items to believe and live by.

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But once I decide that the Bible is true, the next question is enormous: How do I interpret it?

What does God want from me, living right here in my town in this year?

People have been fighting for centuries over the meanings of various Scriptures. Someone will look at a line from the Bible and say, "Look! This is how we're supposed to live!"

And someone else will look at the same line and say, "Naw, those instructions only applied to people back in those days, in the situation that existed when this part of the Bible was written. This isn't a commandment for us today; it was only intended for the culture of that day."

This is a very big deal because there are more than 500 commands in the New Testament alone — this doesn't even count the Old Testament commandments and laws, and any instructions embedded in the historical accounts, the stories of the Bible.

I mean, the Bible says to greet one another with a holy kiss (Romans 16:16). Really?

The Bible says to wash each other's feet (John 13:14). Really?

The Bible says it's indecent for a woman to speak in an assembly (1 Corinthians 14:35). Really?

There are commands about being baptized (Acts 2:38), and women wearing veils over their heads (1 Corinthians 11:10), and having fixed hours of prayer (Acts 3:1).

Are these applicable for today — or only relevant to cultures back in Bible times?

Which were for then, and which are for today?

Acts 2:38 says be baptized. Does this mean me?

Colossians 3:16 says sing songs, hymns, and spiritual songs. Does this mean me?

Acts 15:29 says not to eat blood.

Acts 14:1 says speak Greek in the assembly.

1 Corinthians 10:27 says eat what's set before you, asking no questions.

There are commands about anointing the sick with oil (James 5:14), preaching two by two (Mark 6:7), and not letting women teach men (1 Timothy 2:12) or wear braids (1 Peter 2:12).

It appears from the pages of Scripture that we're supposed to remember the poor (Galatians 3:10), anoint the sick with oil (James 5:14), and abstain from fornication (Acts 15:29).

I'm supposed to be circumcised (Acts 15:5), lift my hands when I pray (1 Timothy 2:8), and speak in tongues (1 Corinthians 14:5).

I can show you warnings in the Bible against seeking marriage (1 Corinthians 7:27), praying in public (Matthew 6:5,6), and eating reptiles (Acts 10:12)!

What was just for the people back then, when the Bible was written? And what's for me today?

Is it possible to sort this out, and know for sure?

Well, context is king.

Until I know the context of what was said, I can't possibly know what was meant.

The languages of the Bible are every bit as slippery as English.

I can't just look at one word or one statement by itself and be sure I've got the meaning.

I have to interpret, and that means I need to get the context.

Context refers to a few different components.

First, if I'm looking for context, I'm looking for the topic.

How often have you walked into a room where the conversation was already under way, and after a while you had to say, "What are you guys talking about?"

You're looking for the topic at hand.

We have to do the same thing in our quest for understanding the heart of God in the Scriptures.

When I read a passage from the Bible, I have to ask, What is the author writing about?

Paul the apostle wrote that "**...God will meet all your needs...**" (Philippians 4:19).

But what's the context?

He's talking about giving to support those who are less fortunate, people in need.

Paul is saying I don't have to fear that I'll give too much, because God will honor my giving to others.

God talks about meeting our needs in other passages, so this isn't the only promise we

have — but it's important to understand what the original intent of a passage was.

Or look at **Matthew 18:20**: Jesus says, “...where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.”

I've heard this passage quoted hundreds of times, usually being claimed as kind of a blanket promise.

But what's the context?

Jesus is talking here about a situation where someone in the church gets offended and refuses to be reconciled, and the church has to discipline them.

In all the times I've heard people quote this passage, I've never heard them quote it in the context of a church discipline situation.

We have to know the point the author was making before we take a passage of Scripture and use it to prove a point or claim it as a promise from God.

The press is notorious for quoting people out of context — they give us the actual words spoken, but without the context in which the words were spoken, so the actual meaning is often elusive.

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Secondly, if I'm looking for context, I have to look at something called “genre.”

This is the style of the writing.

When I go to Barnes & Noble, I don't find 10,000 books lined up alphabetically by title, or alphabetically by author, or sequenced chronologically by the year they were written.

No. There are signs over the various departments of the bookstore, to indicate the various categories of books.

One sign says “Poetry” (I'm not going there).

Another sign says “History.” (That's where I'm usually headed.)

The Bible has different types of books in it.

The book of Psalms is a book of poetry.

The books of Acts is a book of history.

Someone who loves reading poetry but hates reading history will probably enjoy Psalms way more than Acts.

But someone like me, who loves reading history and doesn't have much appreciation for poetry, will find Acts fascinating — while the book of Psalm is, like, a shrug of the shoulders.

In any case, knowing the genre of what you're reading is essential to interpreting it accurately.

If I'm reading the Psalms, I'm reading poetry, which uses symbolic language, and hyperbole — poetic exaggeration — to paint word-pictures and make various points.

But if I'm reading the book of Acts, I'm reading history — the author, Luke, is setting down the facts in a pretty straightforward report.

I can't read the lavish language of the Psalms as if it were a history report.

Nor can I read the clear-cut accounts of Acts and say, “Oh, he's just speaking poetically.”

Or here's another example: the book of Proverbs.
 A lot of people misinterpret proverbs as promises.
 But the book of Proverbs is *not* a book of promises.
 A promise is something that is absolutely true.
 A proverb is *generally* true — it's a word of wisdom, or a precept; it's not a guarantee.

So when **Proverbs 22:6** says, "**Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it,**" it's not expressing a blanket promise from God. It's expressing something that is generally true. Something that's worth building my life on. But my children still have a free will. I may do my best to train them up in the way they should go, but when they're old, they're on their own.

There's one other issue with the history books of the Bible. I see people reading these histories and turning them into doctrine. "King David did this, so we're supposed to do it too" — and so forth. This is an error of "genre." These narratives are historical accounts — they tell us what actually happened — but just because they're in the Bible doesn't mean we're supposed to extrapolate instructions for life from them. I can't look at the book of Acts — a historical account — and say, "Well, the first century Christians did such-and-such, so we should too!" Historical accounts are not a good basis for building a "life doctrine." Unless there's some commentary along with the story that says "Go thou and do likewise," I'm supposed to read these histories as histories. I would go crazy trying to build my life on the record of what someone else did thousands of years ago.

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Thirdly, in my quest for context, I will want to look at the original audience. This passage of Scripture I'm reading at the moment — was it written to Jews living in a theocracy, with God as King and Moses as chief leader? Or was it written to Gentiles living under the authority of Rome? It makes a difference. Look at **1 Chronicles 7:14**. This is where God says, "**If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.**" God was talking here to a theocratic Israel — the nation was directly governed by God back in those days; he wasn't talking to the United States of America. I'm sorry to break the bad news, Americans, but we're not God's chosen people. (We need to get over ourselves!) God has blessed us enormously, but that's his grace in action, not our superior quality. We need to understand also who it was that God made his promises to. The entire Bible was written by people in Middle Eastern cultures, not Western. The original audiences were entirely people in Middle Eastern cultures, not Western. So we need to get how someone living in Palestine 4,000 years ago understood a

conversation in order for us to interpret that conversation.
 We need to get how a first century person would understand Jesus' words in order for us to understand what Jesus really meant.
 Now you can start to see why people spend their whole lives reading and studying and thinking about and talking about the Scriptures: getting the context can take some real effort.

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So are there guidelines for reading a passage of Scripture and determining whether it's about an ancient culture or whether it's relevant to me today?
 I think I can give you a checklist of 7 questions which will help us.

1. Does this passage base its reasoning on a timeless truth or a historical truth?

For example, Jesus says in **John 13:34**, "...As I have loved you, so you must love one another."

Timeless truth.

In **Luke 6:37** he says, "...Forgive, and you will be forgiven."

Obviously not something that's only true for a certain time in history.

In **Matthew 6:3-5**, in his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, "...when you give to the needy," let your giving "**be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.**"

God always sees what's done in secret — so we can be confident that this is a timeless truth for us.

This isn't unique to the first century A.D. It's a timeless truth.

2. Does this passage relate to a local circumstance?

Four separate times, the Bible says, "Greet one another with a holy kiss."

But look at the local circumstances.

In every situation, it was Paul the apostle writing to people who met day to day, house to house.

And in every case, he made this kind of comment at the point where he was closing out a very personal letter.

This isn't to be interpreted as a blanket commandment from God.

This is something that relates to a local circumstance.

3. Is this command given to more than one culture?

For instance, do we find the same instructions given in both the Old Testament and the New?

Or do we find the same instructions given to both a Jewish audience and a Gentile audience?

Look at the Ten Commandments. Can't we say those were basically just for the people of Israel back in the days of Moses?

Nope: 9 of the 10 are repeated in the New Testament.

The only exception is "keep the Sabbath holy."

Colossians 2:16 actually sets us free from meeting on any certain day of the week.

4. Is this command contradicted in some other passage of Scripture?

Do we get one instruction in the Old Testament and another in the New?

Or do we get one instruction in one part of the New Testament and a contradictory

instruction in some other part of the New Testament?

Acts 15:29 says don't eat meat that's been sacrificed to idols — but in **1 Corinthians 8:8** Paul says we're free to eat it.

Or take the ceremonial food laws of the Old Testament.

Acts 10 says they're no longer required.

Paul says in **Colossians 2:16** that we're free to eat anything.

(I would still stay away from the limburger cheese, and the boiled okra, but it's up to you.)

5. Is this command of a moral nature?

An instruction about what to wear isn't on the same level as an instruction about taking a life.

Fashion? Murder. Fashion? Murder. These feel different to me.

Well, one I sense instinctively is about a deep issue of moral consequence.

The other one isn't up there in the same realm.

I want to be way tuned in to something the Bible says about something of a moral nature.

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OK, but then there are two more guidelines — and I would say these are the most important ones.

6. Is there a timeless truth I can extract here, even if the actual command isn't relevant to me?

This is where the rubber begins to really meet the road — because a lot of us want to be able to discount as much instruction as possible.

We do this in every realm of life, not just in pursuit of God's will — and we do it without thinking about it.

Let's say I'm the typical worker in a big corporation, and I'm in a big meeting, and the supervisor stands up and starts talking about changes being required in marketing. I mentally check out, because I'm not in marketing.

Let's say I'm in accounting.

It might be good for the company if I tuned in, in this meeting, to what's happening over in marketing.

It might be helpful to me, too, it might make my own work go more smoothly, if I know how things are going to be different in marketing.

But I'm the typical employee. I'm not going out of my way; I'm not uploading any data I don't have to.

I don't go looking for ways to improve, ways to change.

Until the supervisor says "Now over in accounting" — then I can't avoid it.

A lot of folks approach God's design, expressed in the Scriptures, the same way.

We're hoping that a chunk of the Bible can be written off as irrelevant.

But the healthier approach — if I'm proactively pursuing the heart of God — is to take even a passage that is really about an ancient culture and see if there's a timeless truth I can extract from it.

We giggle about that line, "Greet one another with a holy kiss" — but there's a larger principle here, the principle of hospitality (**1 Peter 4:9**).

And this has value for me.

It will improve the quality of my life to greet people warmly rather than keeping a kind of distance from them, or just pushing right into whatever task I have in mind for them.

When I finally came to understand this concept, it really changed my life. It changed the way I interact with people.

I could have said, Hey, that holy kiss business was just part of their culture back then — but there was something of the heart of God in that ancient word, and getting at it improved the quality of my own journey.

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And here's one final question for our checklist.

If I want to pursue God's will — the longing of God's heart for my life — his best for me — then when I read a passage of Scripture, I'm going to ask myself:

7. *What is the simplest way to understand these words?*

If I read a passage and it seems to say something to me, in plain and simple fashion, but then somebody tries to tell me it means something quite contradictory or strange — I should beware.

God didn't give us his Word to confuse us.

Sure, it takes study — but it's not intended to be a puzzle, and only a few lucky souls can understand it.

This isn't written in code, and you have to have a clergyman to crack it open for you.

Let's be honest with ourselves.

It is possible to write off just about anything in Scripture as irrelevant for today, if I really want to.

The world has changed so dramatically in the past 2,000 years and more, it's hard to find much of anything in common between that culture then and our culture today.

A lot of people use this "ancient culture" argument to discount and ignore the simple, straightforward instructions that God gives us in the Bible.

Any command I don't like, I explain it away as "cultural only."

We need to recognize this kind of extremism for what it is, and avoid it.

But on the flip side of the issue, let's avoid the extremism of dogmatism.

Some of us get so obsessive about the letter of the law — doing the details — that we miss the issue of the heart, the heart of the issue.

Jesus chided the Pharisee far more than he did the prostitute.

For Jesus, it kept coming back to Thing 1 and Thing 2: loving God and loving people — loving God *by* loving people.

The story Jesus told about the so-called "good Samaritan" demonstrated that loving actions mean more to God than proper theology.

When I dig into the Scriptures, when I pursue God's will, when I search for the longing of God's heart, whatever interpretation I come away with needs to be seasoned by the command to love.

If I study a passage of Scripture and I interpret it in a way that leads me away from loving people, I've misinterpreted that passage of Scripture.

If I study a passage and interpret it in a way that leads me toward greater authentic love

for people, then even if I don't have every detail of the theology straight — even if I don't get the original Greek or the historical framework or the hermeneutics or the doctrinal subtext or whatever — when I go love people more fully and more freely and more consistently, God will smile.

And my life will taste better to me.

I'll be richer.

Because I'll be more of what God intended me to be.

More of the dream he dreamed when he first dreamed me up.