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## CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. What the Bible Is and How We Should Approach It</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The Author’s Purpose Tool</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. The Context Tool</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. The Structure Tool</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. The Linking Words Tool</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. The Parallels Tool</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. The Narrator’s Comment Tool</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. The Vocabulary Tool</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. The Translations Tool</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. The Tone and Feel Tool</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. The Repetition Tool</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. The Quotation/Allusion Tool</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. The Genre Tool</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. The Copycat Tool</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. The Bible Time Line Tool</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Contents

16. The “Who Am I?” Tool 127  
17. The “So What?” Tool 133

Conclusion: Pulling It All Together 141  
Appendix: It Really Works! 149  
Recommended Reading 151  
Scripture Index 155
“It’s All a Matter of Interpretation”
Most conversations I’ve had with non-Christians about the Bible end up there sooner or later: It’s all a matter of interpretation. Sure, you say it means that Jesus is God and that sex outside marriage is wrong and that heaven is only for Christians, but maybe for me it means that Jesus was just a good teacher and sex with anyone is OK as long as you both want it and heaven is for everybody. It’s all just a matter of interpretation.

Actually, we’ve all been conditioned to think like that. It’s part of the whole philosophical movement called “postmodernism,” and over the last few decades it has infiltrated the TV shows that we watch and the classrooms that we sit in. Postmodernism teaches (among other things) that when I come to a piece of literature such as the Bible, what matters is not what it means, but what it means for me. And that might be different from what it means for you. And that’s OK.

I wonder if you’ve ever been in a Bible study that went something like this:

Leader: Does anyone have any thoughts about verse 1?
Person A: I think it’s talking about X, and . . . (blah, blah) . . .
Person B: Yes, I see what you’re saying, Person A, and I totally respect you. For me, though, it means Y, the opposite of X.
Leader: Mmmm. Thank you both. Let’s move on to verse 2.
Introduction

That’s one aspect of postmodernism in action. The text means one thing for one person and the complete opposite for another, but both interpretations are to be respected and treated as equally valid.

But the apostle Paul doesn’t see it like that. He thinks that there is a right and a wrong way to understand the Bible. He writes to a young church leader: “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 Tim. 2:15).

Here are some of the joys of understanding the Bible correctly:

- You hear the voice of your heavenly Father speaking to you in the Bible.
- You learn what he is really like from his own lips (and often God’s true character turns out to be a surprise because we’re so used to secondhand caricatures).
- You discover the wonderful truth of salvation and how to be sure of heaven.
- You find out the things that are on God’s heart—what really matters to him about this world and his will for your life.
- The truth actually changes you. Get this: it doesn’t just inform you of things, it does things in you.

On the flip side, the consequences of misunderstanding the Bible can be devastating:

There are some things in them [Paul’s letters] that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures. (2 Pet. 3:16)

I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish everyone with tears. (Acts 20:29–31)

Many of the world’s leading cults—Mormonism, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Christian Science—claim to place the Bible at the center of their reli-
They just interpret it “differently.” But even mainstream Christians can end up in a real mess because they think that the Bible is saying or promising something that it isn’t. I (Andrew) think of a Christian I knew at college who was young but dying of cancer. Some well-meaning Christians told her mother that she would be healed if only they had “enough faith.” It was a desperately cruel error; they added the agonizing guilt of “maybe I haven’t believed enough” to the grief of losing a daughter. But they had verses in the Bible—tragically misunderstood verses—to back it up.

The truth is that without some care in your interpretation, you can make the Bible say almost anything. It may shock you, for example, to discover that the Bible says twice that “there is no God.” Check it out—Psalms 14:1 and 53:1. Seriously, have a look.

In our work with university students in London, we’ve seen people get the Bible right and watched their eyes light up with excitement at new truths and seen their lives changed by the Word of God. It’s been a privilege to witness that. But we’ve also seen people get the Bible wrong and end up in trouble or even lose their faith altogether. And that breaks our hearts. That’s why we’ve written this book.

This is a book to help you to understand the Bible correctly. We don’t claim that we will always get it perfectly right. But nearly right is more valuable than half right and much better than wholly wrong.

We want to help you to dig deeper to find hidden riches in the Bible. We hope that parts of the Bible that previously seemed like gobbledygook will begin to make sense, and that bits that were clear already will become even more vivid and gripping.

Most of all, we want to help you to do all this for yourself. You may go to a church where the pastor is a gifted teacher of the Bible, and each week he brings it alive for you. Certainly there are many useful commentaries written by scholars who understand the Bible very well and explain it verse by verse (see pp. 153–154 of the recommended reading list for some suggestions). Pastors and scholars are a gift from God, and we should be grateful for their help. But we shouldn’t be content to leave it entirely to the experts. The Bereans in the book of Acts are an example to us, because even though they were taught by the great apostle Paul
A Science and an Art
Reading the Bible is both a science and an art. By calling it a science, we mean that as a discipline it is rigorous and structured; there are certain principles to follow in order to understand the Bible correctly. Those are what we hope to teach in the following pages.

However, we don’t want you to get the idea that understanding the Bible is an automatic and mechanical process—as though you just apply the tools and out pops the answer. It’s not like that.

Understanding the Bible is also an art. It is something you learn by doing, something you “catch” as well as get taught, something intuitive as much as logical. That is why we have called the following chapters “tools” rather than “rules”; like a master craftsman, you will need to exercise judgment and skill in the way you use them.

Bear the following points in mind:

• You won’t need every tool for every passage you read.
• Some tools will be crucial for some passages, others secondary.
• Sometimes the tools will work only when used together, one tool enabling you to use another.

Like learning to ride a bike, after a while you will forget the tools, because the principles behind them will have become second nature.

The Format of This Book
Each chapter introduces you to a separate tool and explains how it works. Although there are illustrations from the Bible throughout, we’ll some-
times spend a bit longer on an example to show you how that particular tool really can help us discover something exciting and relevant that the Bible is saying. Finally, the “Dig Deeper” exercises give you a chance to practice using the tools for yourself.

At the end we’ve included a brief appendix with a suggestion of how you might use the toolkit concept in your small group.

A note on authorship: This book was very much a joint effort—we planned it together, wrote about half of it each, and then revised and edited each other’s chapters. Most of the time we write as “we,” but we use “I” for anecdotes that happened only to one of us, or (in the case of Nigel) when referring to “my wife Elisa.”
What is the difference between a novel and an encyclopedia? Well, the encyclopedia is certainly heavier, unless you read very long novels! But what about how you read them?

When you use the encyclopedia, you simply turn to the entry you are interested in, say “Asparagus.” The fact that the entry before “Asparagus” was “Asps” (cobras) and the one after it was “Aspartame” (an artificial sweetener) is irrelevant. In fact, you don’t even look at them, unless you get bored with reading about asparagus.

Imagine reading a novel in the same way: you open the book up halfway through and read the third paragraph down. Try it if you like. We can guarantee it won’t make much sense. You don’t know who the characters are or how the plot is unfolding; you have no idea what is going on. That is why we read a novel from beginning to end.

Which of these two approaches should we use when we read the Bible?

We should treat it more like the novel. Not that we have to read the whole thing from beginning to end every time we open it. But we do need to recognize that individual chapters are connected to what comes before and after. Context matters! In fact, as someone has said, *a text*
without a context is a con. You have a minimal chance of understanding it correctly.

I remember hearing someone introduce a song with these words from John: “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” (John 12:32). Then they said something like, “We are now going to lift Jesus up on our praises, and as we do that he will draw people to himself.” That was an example of the encyclopedia method. It completely ignored the very next sentence: “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” He said this to show by what kind of death he was going to die” (John 12:32–33).

Jesus’ talk of being “lifted up” speaks of his being lifted up on the cross; that is how he will draw all men to himself. It has nothing to do with our praises. Of course, this doesn’t diminish the value of praising Jesus in song. Indeed, we should encourage each other to do so. We just shouldn’t use John 12:32 for that purpose.

There are different levels of context (see Fig. 1). A sentence comes in the context of a paragraph. A paragraph comes in the context of a chapter or section. A chapter comes in the context of a whole Bible book. Lastly, the book comes in the context of the whole Bible—but that’s something that we’ll look at separately using the Bible Time Line tool.
The Context Tool

This is, of course, the first of the Ten Commandments. If we read this and the nine others that follow it on their own, it might be possible to arrive at a kind of legalism—the idea that you become one of God’s people by being good enough, that you must earn your way to heaven by perfectly keeping all the rules.

That terrible misunderstanding is impossible, however, if we start reading just one verse earlier: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me” (Ex. 20:2–3).

God gives these commandments to a people that he has already saved from Egypt—that’s clear not only from the preceding verse, but also from the context of the previous nineteen chapters, which have described the rescue. God can’t be saying they have to obey his laws in order to be saved. He’s saying that this is how they should behave now that they have been saved.

EXAMPLE

The book of 2 Samuel is full of tragedy and tears. Be warned, the next few pages are going to be very sad. We pick up the sorry tale in chapter 13.

Scene 1: King David’s son Amnon rapes his half-sister, Tamar. Afterwards he hates her. “Get up and get out,” he says. “Get this woman out of here.” And it ends in tears. “And Tamar put ashes on her head and tore the long robe that she wore. And she laid her hand on her head and went away, crying aloud as she went” (2 Sam. 13:19).

Scene 2: David’s other son, Absalom, arranges for the murder of his half brother Amnon, to avenge his sister. At the news of Amnon’s death, there are more tears: “the king’s sons came and lifted up their voice and wept. And the king also and all his servants wept very bitterly” (2 Sam. 13:36).

But in chapter 15 things get worse still. Not just rape. Not just murder. Civil war. Absalom has pretensions to the throne. He is pretty
good-looking, we’re told, and a very smooth operator. Whenever anyone goes to visit his father, the king, Absalom intercepts them and turns on the charm. In this way he steals the hearts of the men of Israel.

Eventually Absalom secretly declares himself king in his father’s place. David has to flee for his life. He leaves the palace behind. He leaves ten of his wives. (Absalom later rapes them.) He leaves behind his countrymen. It’s a pretty unhappy procession: “And all the land wept aloud as all the people passed by. . . . David went up the ascent of the Mount of Olives, weeping as he went, barefoot and with his head covered. And all the people who were with him covered their heads, and they went up, weeping as they went” (2 Sam. 15:23, 30).

Finally, the civil war is over, and David’s army wins. Absalom’s hair is so long that it gets stuck in a tree as he’s riding along on his horse. As he dangles in the air, Joab puts a spear through him. A mighty victory. David’s life is no longer in danger. The rebel Absalom is crushed. Fantastic.

But that’s not quite how David took the news:

And the king was deeply moved and went up to the chamber over the gate and wept. And as he went, he said, “O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!”

It was told Joab, “Behold, the king is weeping and mourning for Absalom.”

So the victory that day was turned into mourning for all the people, for the people heard that day, “The king is grieving for his son.” . . . The king covered his face, and the king cried with a loud voice, “O my son Absalom, O Absalom, my son, my son.” (2 Sam. 18:33–19:4)

It is a catalogue of tragedy for David. Rape, murder, civil war, the death of a son he loved despite everything. I don’t know about you, but I find myself choking up at some of the verses I’ve quoted. It’s just so desperate.

But why does it happen? Why so much suffering? Why such unimaginable sorrow? So many tears?

As we’ve reported it above, it makes no sense. If you pick up the story from chapter 13 (as we have done), it is meaningless. But the story doesn’t begin in chapter 13. We need the context.

Second Samuel 11 narrates some events that we’re more familiar with. King David is walking on the roof of his palace, and he catches sight of a
beautiful woman named Bathsheba taking a bath. She’s a real stunner—he can’t keep his eyes off her. Turns out she’s married to someone else, but that doesn’t stop David, and he sleeps with her. Unfortunately she gets pregnant, and the only way to cover it up is to get her husband killed in battle.

But the cover-up fails, because there is a witness who sees everything. God sees it. And it displeases him. And through his prophet Nathan, he speaks these terrifying words:

Why have you despised the word of the LORD, to do what is evil in his sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and have taken his wife to be your wife and have killed him with the sword of the Ammonites. Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised me and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife. (2 Sam. 12:9–10)

All the tragedy of the following chapters stems from David’s sin. “The sword shall never depart from your house,” God says. And it never does. Rape, murder, civil war, the death of Absalom. All because David turned his back on God and slept with Bathsheba. Who would have thought that the consequences would be so massive?

I don’t think we would, would we? We’d never guess that the effects of sin could be so devastating.

It’s not the world of the soaps, is it? Or Friends? That was a great show, at least the early episodes. Monica, Joey, Chandler, Phoebe, Rachel, Ross—they don’t have much time for Jesus, except as a swearword. But hey, they have a good time, don’t they? They have a laugh. They’re easygoing. Because rejecting God doesn’t matter in Friends. It’s a world where nothing you do has lasting consequences.

But 2 Samuel is screaming to us, “That’s not the real world. In the real world sin does matter. There are consequences. It wrecks relationships, it messes up lives. It ends in tears. It’s not worth it.”

I (Andrew) went to the British Library in London once. They have some pretty amazing things there: original Beatles lyrics in John Lennon’s handwriting on the backs of envelopes, pages from Leonardo da Vinci’s notebook, all kinds of stuff. The thing I liked best was the draft
Dig Deeper

Declaration of War against Germany from the Second World War. It was typed on an old typewriter. And at the top of the page someone had scribbled in pencil, “To be checked.”

And I thought—no kidding! You’d want to be pretty sure you’d got it right, wouldn’t you? You don’t want to end up declaring war on Scotland by mistake, because of a typo. The consequences are massive, so you think before you act.

And that is what 2 Samuel would say to us. Think pretty carefully before you turn your back on God. Are you prepared for the consequences?

---

**DIG DEEPER**

Read Mark 8:22–26. What do these verses tell you on their own?

Now look at the context: read verses 14–21 and 27–30. What change is there in the disciples’ understanding?

Look at Jesus’ description of the problem in 8:18. Has there been another healing miracle alongside the physical one?
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