A MESSAGE for ALL TIME
Understanding & Applying the Bible

Many people read the Bible, but at the same time many struggle with understanding and applying its ideas and messages to everyday life. In this excerpt from his book Applying the Bible, Jack Kuhatschek offers a guide to reading Scripture and grasping its truths. Taking a closer look at some of the most common difficulties, he provides tools to help you overcome the barriers that get in the way of understanding God’s Word and its relevancy for you in today’s culture.

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introduction

A Message for All Time
Understanding and Applying the Bible

Albert Einstein is best known for his wild hair and his famous equation \( E = mc^2 \). What most people don't know is that he spent the last 30 years of his life searching for a theory he never found—a theory he knew in his heart would someday be discovered. Einstein believed there could be one grand theory that would explain how all the major forces of the universe are related.
Einstein’s quest continues to this day. Some call it the Unified Field Theory. Others describe it as the Grand Unification Theory. Perhaps the most popular label is the Theory of Everything.

Although I have little in common with Albert Einstein, I too have been captivated by the thought of a Grand Unifying Theory, one for the Bible—a simple yet elegant theory that captures all of the facts from Genesis to Revelation, all the teaching of Scripture, and sums it up in a way that even a child can grasp.

Why? Because understanding the Grand Unifying Theory of the Bible reveals the heart and mind of God and what is most important to Him both now and throughout eternity. It helps us grasp the driving force that should direct our lives, and the primary purpose for which we were created.

My search was rewarded one evening while having dinner with a seminary professor. I asked him why so many chapters in Exodus are devoted to seemingly endless details for building the tabernacle. “Oh, that’s easy,” he said. “God Himself was coming to live with His people!” That simple response became the key that unlocked the meaning of Scripture. I discovered that this master key fit the entire story of the Bible from beginning to end. In fact, in one of the final chapters of the Bible, the apostle John writes the following climax to his great vision:
Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away”

(REVELATION 21:1-5)

God created us to be part of a loving community with Himself at the center. Because God is love, He made us in His image so that we could experience the depth of His love—not only with Him but also with each other.

The fall of humanity in Genesis 3 was like an earthquake that fractured our God-given purpose. At its core, sin destroys relationships, community, and fellowship with the One who made us.

But God never gave up on His original plan! Every book of the Bible, every story within its pages, describes the great lengths He went to in order to bring us back to Himself—ultimately by becoming
one of us and then by dying on the cross to remove the gulf that separated us from Him.

When you realize that the Bible isn't primarily about rules but relationships, your Scripture reading will be transformed. And when you discover that God's Word isn't mainly about laws but love, you'll feel the heartbeat of the One who made you for Himself.

The following pages are written to help you understand and apply the Bible. But as you embark on this important journey, always let the "Grand Unifying Theory" be the North Star that guides you to your destination.

Jack Kuhatschek
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step one

Understanding the Original Situation

In the classic movie *Back to the Future*, a teenager from the 1980s enters a time machine (a modified DeLorean car) and speeds down a flaming path back to the 1950s. The town is the same, but everything has changed. Girls wear ponytails and bobby socks and say things like, “Isn’t he a dreamboat!” Guys have oily, slicked-back hair and wear letter sweaters and baggy pants. As a car with white sidewall tires pulls into a service station, uniformed attendants rush out to fill the
tank, clean the windshield and check the oil. Gas is 19 cents a gallon, and Cokes are 5 cents. As we watch the movie, we are struck with how odd life used to be and how much things have changed!

We also realize how many things are the same. Being a teenager is as awkward now as then. We still have school, homework, parties, friendships and first love. People still cruise down the road with their favorite music blaring from the radio. Little boys will always tease their sisters, and although Coke is no longer 5 cents, people still love to drink it. What’s so different?

We have a similar experience when we read the Bible. Many things seem strange or unfamiliar. People wear sandals, ride camels, and live in tents. They offer animal sacrifices and consider pork “unclean.” They worship on Saturday and work on Sunday. When a woman can’t have children, she allows her husband to marry her female servant. What a different world!

Of course, many things seem just the same. The people in the Bible struggle with temptation and have difficulty trusting God. So do we. We identify with Job’s suffering, even though he lived 4,000 years ago. Husbands still need to love their wives,
and children still need to obey their parents. Many times we feel that the biblical writers are speaking directly to us, giving us encouragement, comfort, and hope. Again and again, the Bible shows us how God was patiently and mercifully caring for His people and calling them to love Him and one another.

The strange-yet-familiar feelings we have when reading the Bible (or watching a movie about the 50s) are a result of historical distance. Although we have much in common with the people in the Bible, there is a 2,000- to 4,000-year gap between us. They lived in a different time, place, and culture, and they spoke a different language.

We cannot ignore this historical and cultural distance if we want to understand and apply the Bible.

**Time Travel**

In a sense, studying and applying the Bible is like entering a time machine. We must cross the barriers of time, language, culture, and geography in order to understand the people of the Bible and how God’s Word applied to the situations they faced. How we do that is the goal of this section.

Then, when we have understood how God’s Word applied to the people of that century, we reenter the time machine and return to the 21st century. Now we are able to reflect on how Scripture applies to our time and culture and the problems we face. That will be the goal of later sections.

Our time machine is constructed from the various tools available to the modern student of the Bible. With
these tools we can cross the barriers that separate us from the biblical world.

**Crossing the time barrier.** Because the events of the Bible took place thousands of years ago, we have one obvious problem in understanding those events—we weren't there! Therefore, we often lack important information regarding the historical context in which those events took place.

Almost every New Testament letter was written to address a particular problem or set of problems in their new relationship with God through Jesus: The Galatians were seeking to be justified by law; the Corinthians wanted answers to questions about marriage, spiritual gifts, and meat offered to idols; Timothy needed to know how to restore order to a church.

Unless we understand these problems or questions, the letters are like listening to one end of a telephone conversation. We hear what the author is saying, but we don't know *why* he is saying it. The same is true when we read the Psalms and prophets. We know only half of the story!

For example, in John's first epistle he writes:

Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God (1 John 4:1-3).
This passage has often been misinterpreted as a test for demon possession. As a result, it has also been misapplied. We are told that whenever we encounter someone who may be demon possessed, we are to “test the spirits” by asking the person, “Has Jesus Christ come in the flesh?” If the person is possessed by an evil spirit, he or she will respond “No.” But if the person answers “Yes,” then we can rule out demon possession.

This is a classic case of interpreting a passage apart from its historical context. A careful reading of the text reveals that John is not giving a test for demon possession but rather for telling a genuine prophet from a false prophet (v. 1). And the false prophets he has in mind were ones who were denying that the divine Christ had truly become human, since they believed that “flesh” and matter were evil.

How do we know this? There are several ways to learn about the historical context of this or any passage. One way is to look for clues within the book or passage itself. In 1 John 2:19 we discover that these false prophets had originally been part of the church: “They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us” (2:19). John calls them “antichrists” (v. 18). One purpose of his letter is to
warn his readers about them: “I am writing these things to you about those who are trying to lead you astray” (v. 26). There are many other statements in John’s letter, some explicit and some implicit, that give us additional details about the situation his readers faced and why he wrote to them.

As we discover the historical context of a book or passage, it is also a good idea to read related passages in the Bible. For example, Psalm 51 was written by David after his adultery with Bathsheba. We can read about David and Bathsheba in 2 Samuel 11–12. (The heading over Psalm 51 tells us why it was written. When such information isn’t given, a Bible dictionary or commentary will often mention related passages.) Similarly, if we study the book of Philippians, we will want to consult the book of Acts, which provides information about the founding of the church at Philippi (see Acts 16).

The more we know about the historical context of a biblical passage, the better equipped we will be to understand the message of the author. Such information can be like finding missing pieces of a puzzle. As they are put into place, the whole picture becomes much clearer.

Crossing the language barrier. The fact that the Bible was written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek instead of English creates a significant barrier to understanding its message. Anyone who tries to learn these languages quickly realizes how difficult they are to master. Fortunately, those who are experts in biblical languages have crossed this barrier for us by translating the
biblical languages into modern English. In fact, there are numerous Bible translations to choose from.

There are formal-equivalence translations such as the New American Standard Bible and the English Standard Version. There are functional- or dynamic-equivalence translations such as the New International Version and the New Living Translation. And there are free translations such as the New Testament in Modern English (J. B. Phillips).

Each type of translation has strengths and weaknesses. A formal-equivalence translation follows the wording of Hebrew or Greek as closely as possible, but such wording often sounds awkward in English.

A free translation is more concerned with clarity than exact wording. Such translations are easy to read but give the impression that the Bible was written in the 21st century. For example, in the original Living Bible’s translation of Psalm 119:105, the word lamp is rendered as “flashlight”!

The careful Bible student will take advantage of all types of translations. Each one can provide insights into what the author originally said in his own language.

**Crossing the cultural barrier.** The events in the Bible took place in many different cultures: Egyptian, Canaanite, Babylonian, Jewish, Greek, and Roman (to name a few). It is not uncommon, therefore, to read about customs or beliefs that seem strange to us since they are so far removed from 21st-century culture.

What were household gods and why did Rachel steal
them from her father (Genesis 31:19)? Why did Jonah fear the Ninevites? Who were the Samaritans, and why was there such hatred between them and the Jews (John 4:9)? What was Corinth like, and did the Corinthians face special temptations because they lived there? As we understand the answers to such questions, we receive new insight into how God’s Word applied to their particular actions, fears, conflicts, and temptations.

Imagine we are studying Amos, and we come across the following verse: “On the day I punish Israel for her sins . . . the horns of the altar will be cut off and fall to the ground” (Amos 3:14). This verse is meaningless to us in the 21st century, but a Bible dictionary or encyclopedia will help us understand what Amos meant.

If we look up the word altar or horn we discover that the altar in the temple had horn-shaped projections at each of its four corners. The sacrificial blood was smeared on these. In Old Testament times, many Jews believed the altar was a place of refuge. Those seeking safety would come to the temple and grab the horns of the altar. Amos is warning that the Israelites will flee to the altar and find its horns (that is, its protection) are gone!

It is impossible to study the Bible without becoming immersed

As we become more familiar with ancient Middle Eastern culture, we are better able to cross the barrier between our world and theirs.
in ancient Middle Eastern culture. As we become more familiar with that culture, we are better able to cross the barrier between our world and theirs.

We can discover a great deal about the culture simply from the book or passage being studied. For example, the Gospels are full of references to life in first-century Palestine. We know that the Jews were under Roman rule (Luke 3:1) and expected the Messiah to come and free them from their enemies (1:71). We also gain an understanding of everyday life in Bible times: business practices (16:1-18), weddings (John 2), funerals (John 11), wages (Matthew 20:1-16), taxes (22:15-22) and so on.

Crossing the geographical barrier. Some people are fortunate enough to visit Israel. When they return, they report that the Bible comes to life in ways they have never experienced before. Those of us who have not visited the Holy Land can also have this experience in a more limited way. As we learn about biblical geography, many Bible passages take on new meaning.

For example, in Amos 1:3–2:16 the prophet condemns Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, Ammon, Moab, Judah, and Israel. At first it may seem that Amos mentions these cities and nations at random, but a closer examination reveals otherwise. The first three are the capitals of nations unrelated to Israel. The next three are relatives of Israel. Judah, the seventh, is Israel’s brother nation to the south. Finally, Israel itself is named.

The effect on Amos’ audience would have been staggering. The Israelites would have cheered at his judgments against the heathen nations. But as his words came closer
and closer to home—Ammon, Moab, Judah—they would have begun to sweat. With the words “For three sins of Israel, even for four, I will not relent” (2:6), they were caught in Amos’ coil of condemnation.

There are several ways to become familiar with biblical geography. Many Bibles include maps. A good Bible atlas or Bible dictionary can also supply valuable information about unfamiliar places.

**Careful Reading**

Imagine that you have entered the time machine and have completely crossed the barriers of time, language, culture and geography. You are in Corinth in the first century. You are dressed in Greek clothes. You speak Greek fluently and know the surrounding culture and geography. You are even a regular visitor in the church at Corinth and are intimately acquainted with the people and problems in the church.

As you are gathering for worship in a nearby home, a messenger comes to the door with a letter from Paul, the letter we now call 1 Corinthians. You unroll the scroll and begin reading the letter (in Greek, of course!). Does the fact that you have successfully crossed the barriers of time, language, culture, and geography mean that you will automatically understand what Paul is saying to the Corinthians? Not necessarily.

The apostle Peter was one of Paul’s contemporaries and still found some things in his letters “hard to understand” (2 Peter 3:16). Of course Peter’s difficulty may have been that Paul was unclear in places. But even when Paul
writes clearly, our success in understanding him (or any other author) will depend on how skillful we are at reading. One aspect, therefore, of learning how to study the Bible focuses on acquiring reading skills—the kind of skills that will help us whether we are reading the Bible, a novel, or a magazine.

As we read, our first goal is to answer one primary question: What did the author mean to convey to the original readers? (The question of what the passage means to us today will be covered later.)

You can discover the meaning of the author by following five guidelines:

1. **Identify the type of literature you are studying.**

   A cult expert was giving a lecture one evening at a local church. A few cult members heard about the lecture and decided to attend. About halfway through the meeting, one of them stood up and began arguing that God the Father has a physical body like ours. He “proved” his point by quoting passages which refer to God’s “right arm,” “hand,” “eyes” and so on. The speaker asked him to read aloud Psalm 17:8: “Hide me in the shadow of your wings.”

   “But that is simply a figure of speech,” he protested. “Exactly!” replied the speaker.
The biblical authors communicated in a variety of ways—through stories, letters, poems, proverbs, parables, metaphors, and symbols. Each type of literature has its own unique features. We must identify the type of literature and language an author is using in order to interpret his meaning correctly. If we assume he is speaking literally when he is speaking metaphorically, we end up with nonsense.

2 Get an overview of the book. An overview helps us discover meaning in two ways. First, it enables us to discover the main theme of the book as we observe repeated ideas. Second, an overview helps us discover the structure of the book—how the parts of the book contribute to the overall theme.

An overview is like looking through a zoom lens. Begin with a panoramic view by reading quickly through the book, finding repeated ideas or words that tie the book together. When it isn’t possible to read the entire book, skim through its contents, paying particular attention to chapter or paragraph headings.

Next, zoom in closer by looking for major sections or divisions within the book. Each section will focus primarily on one subject. Once you have discovered that subject, try to summarize it by briefly titling the section. Now you are ready to focus on the details of the landscape—the paragraphs, sentences, and words.

3 Study the book passage by passage. Once you have an overview of the theme and structure of a book, begin studying it passage by passage. In our modern Bibles a passage can be a paragraph, a group of paragraphs or a
chapter. Realize, however, that the Bible did not originally contain chapters, paragraphs, or verses (or even punctuation!). These are helpful additions to our Bibles, but we need not be bound by them.

4 Be sensitive to the mood of the book or passage. The Bible is more than a collection of ideas. The biblical authors and characters were people like us with passions and feelings. Sorrow and agony permeate Jesus’ experience in Gethsemane. Galatians radiates the heat of Paul’s anger toward the Judaizers and his perplexity over the Galatians. Psalm 148 is bursting with praise.

While this is a more subjective aspect of Bible study, it can give us rich insights into the feelings and motivations of the biblical authors or characters. This in turn will add depth to our understanding of what they are saying.

5 Compare your interpretation with one or two commentaries. Once you feel you have understood the main subject of the passage and what the author is saying about it, compare your interpretation with that of one or two good commentaries. They can give you
additional insights and can serve as a corrective if you have misunderstood something the author has said. But do your best to understand the passage on your own before consulting commentaries.

**Back to the Future**

Now we are ready to reenter the time machine and return to the 21st century. As we travel from the biblical world back to our own, we must recross the barriers of time, culture, language, and geography.

In the broadest sense, this is what application is all about. We seek to apply what we learned in Jerusalem, Ephesus, or Corinth to our present-day needs in Chicago, London, or Hong Kong. We take the message originally spoken in Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic and communicate it clearly in our own language. We take the truths originally spoken in a different time and culture and apply them to the similar-yet-different needs of our own culture.

One important step in preparing to make this return journey is to reverse the process of seeing God in the details. Now we need to find general principles that underlie the specific rules and requirements of Scripture.
As a large family gathered around the table for meals, each member took a turn praying for the food. Everyone, however, dreaded the meals when the youngest presided.

His prayers seemed like an endless ordeal because they were so specific. He would begin with the contents of his own plate and then work his way around the table: “Dear Lord, thank you for my egg, Mommy’s egg, Daddy’s egg, Stephen’s egg, and Lucy’s egg. Thank you for my bacon, Mommy’s bacon, Daddy’s bacon, Stephen’s bacon, and
Lucy’s bacon. Then he would conclude his lengthy prayer by mentioning whatever remained on the table: “Thank you for the salt, thank you for the pepper, thank you for the butter, and thank you for the jelly. In Jesus’ name, Amen.” At that point everyone would breathe a sigh of relief and begin the now-cold meal.

One morning he surprised everyone. The usual, awful moment had arrived. The other family members bowed their heads, folded their hands and bit their lips. They all knew it would be five to ten minutes before they could taste the hickory-smoked bacon and the golden pancakes or drink their orange juice and once-hot coffee. The youngest began as usual, but astonished everyone by saying, “Dear Lord, thank you for this food. In Jesus’ name, Amen.” He had learned to generalize!

Though the Bible was written to particular people in particular situations, its message is for all people in all times. Since the time of Jesus, His followers have needed to know how to appropriately live in response to God’s grace, love, and salvation in Jesus Christ. How can we show our gratitude to the God who has given Himself to us? What does love for God and neighbor look like in the grind of daily life? Fortunately, God has shown His children what it means to live in relationship with Him. But sometimes that guidance is so specific that it seems to have no relevance for many modern readers.

Learning to generalize is one of the most important steps in applying the Bible. When, on the surface, a passage seems to have little application to our situation today, we need to look beneath the surface for a general principle.
The Greatest Commandment

The idea of finding general principles behind the specific teachings of Scripture is not a recent discovery. Jesus Himself taught us to do this.

An expert in the Law once came to Jesus in order to test His knowledge of Scripture. “Teacher,” he asked, “which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” In asking this question, the expert was inviting Jesus to comment on one of the most important issues of his day.

The Jewish rabbis counted 613 individual commandments in the Law, regulating everything from mildewed clothing to sacrifices on the Day of Atonement. They tried to differentiate between “heavy” (or “great”) commands and those that were “light” (or “little”). The rabbis did not suggest disregarding the lesser commands in favor of the greater ones. Rather, they wondered whether some commands were greater in the sense that by obeying them a person automatically obeyed the lesser ones.

Jesus replied, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” Notice especially what He said next: “All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (Matthew 22:36-40, emphasis mine).

In other words, these two commandments summarized the rest. According to Jesus, these two commands capture the intention and spirit of every law, rule, and commandment in the Bible and explain the message of prophets like Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Jeremiah. These two commandments were so
general that they could apply to many different situations. In fact, they could apply to every situation. They expressed the inner motive and ultimate goal of every law given by God.

Love for God and our neighbor does not exhaust the meaning of Scripture. The Bible also speaks a great deal about God’s love for us, a love which is not in view in the two great commandments. Jesus later added a third commandment to the previous two: “My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you” (John 15:12). The new objects of this love are our brothers and sisters in Christ. The new standard of love is Christ’s sacrificial love for us demonstrated on the cross.

Why then were so many commands necessary? They illustrate what it meant to love God and neighbor in the specific situations of everyday life for the various people in various circumstances to whom they were originally written. For example, what did it mean to love your neighbor in business practices? “Do not use dishonest standards when measuring length, weight or quantity” (Leviticus 19:35). What did it mean to love those who were hungry and needy? “When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest… Leave them for the poor and the foreigner” (19:9-10).

In one sense, finding general principles behind the specific commands of Scripture is easy. Whatever the command, whatever the situation, we know that they are expressions of love for God and neighbor. From Genesis to Revelation the Scriptures emphasize that following Christ is primarily about our relationship with God and others—a relationship that begins with the God who
revealed himself in Jesus Christ (Philippians 2:5-11).

Yet it would get pretty monotonous if these were the only general principles we ever discovered. Imagine having love as the one and only theme of every sermon, every Christian book, every Bible study! Fortunately, this is not the case. Although the main themes of the Bible are so simple that even a child can understand them, there is greater richness and nuance in Scripture than we could ever imagine.

Levels of Application
The Bible contains many levels of application. These levels are like a pyramid, with only two commands (love for God and neighbor) at the pinnacle and all other instruction and requirements between the pinnacle and the base.

The commands near the top of the pyramid are fewer in number because they are more general and abstract. Those nearer the base of the pyramid (such as “Do not muzzle your ox”) are more numerous because they are more specific, detailed, and concrete.

The instructions near the base sometimes seem pointless or obscure until we move up to higher levels on the pyramid and discover the principles or reasons behind them. Conversely, the principles near the top of the pyramid often seem vague and abstract until they are fleshed out by the more concrete principles near the base.

Let’s look at a passage that illustrates various levels of application.

Paul’s instructions about food sacrificed to idols.
In 1 Corinthians 8 Paul gives instructions about a subject which seems irrelevant today in many cultures—food
sacrificed to idols. However, when we look more closely at the passage we discover that the issue of food is only one level of application, the one at the bottom of the pyramid. There are two other levels in the pyramid, each of which can be applied today.

Before we look for these general principles, we must first understand the problem faced by Paul's readers and how the passage applied to them. Why were they concerned about food sacrificed to idols? *The Handbook of Life in Bible Times* helps us cross this cultural barrier:

Even the relatively ordinary household duties of buying meat from the butcher or going out to dinner with friends were fraught with problems. Some butchers bought their produce wholesale from the pagan temples where it had been ritually slaughtered or partially offered as a sacrifice to idols. Christians in Corinth were unsure whether or not to buy such meat, or to eat it if it was set in front of them.¹

Paul helps the Corinthians see this problem from a Christian perspective. He tells them that in one sense he doesn't care whether they eat food sacrificed to idols. Why? First, he knows that there is really only one God: “We know that ‘An idol is nothing at all in the world’ and that ‘There is no God but one.’ For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many ‘gods’ and many ‘lords’), yet for us there is but one God” (*1 Corinthians* 8:4-6). Second, Paul realizes that food is spiritually neutral: “Food does not bring us near to God, we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do” (v. 8).
Yet Paul realizes that “not everyone possesses this knowledge” (v. 7). Some Christians who had been deeply involved in idol worship might misunderstand if Paul and others ate food sacrificed to idols:

For if someone with a weak conscience sees you, with all your knowledge, eating in an idol’s temple, won’t that person be emboldened to eat what is sacrificed to idols? So this weak brother or sister, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. When you sin against them in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ (vv. 10-12).

Rather than take this risk, Paul concludes: “Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother or sister to fall into sin, I will never eat [idol] meat again, so that I will not cause them to fall” (v. 13).

Although Paul’s conclusion not to eat idol meat has little application in many cultures today, the reasons he gives are still valid. In verses 8-9 he states that the real issue isn’t idol meat but rather “that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak.” In other words, there is a more important principle at stake: Paul doesn’t want us to do anything that might cause other Christians to sin by violating their consciences (vv. 7, 10). This would “wound” or “destroy” the persons, whereas Paul wants us to build them up in love (v. 1). This principle could apply to many practices today.

We have moved from the very specific and possibly irrelevant instruction about food sacrificed to idols to the more general and more applicable principle about not
letting our freedom cause someone else to sin. Paul has even mentioned one of the two general principles behind this and every command of Scripture—that of building up our brother or sister through love (v. 1). Therefore, our pyramid in this passage has three levels of application:

**Level 1** (the most specific): The Corinthians should not eat food sacrificed to idols if it causes those with weak consciences to follow their example.

**Level 2** (more general): The Corinthians should not allow their freedom (in any area) to become a stumbling block to others.

**Level 3** (the most general): The Corinthians should only do those things which build up others in love.

If we realize that *every* passage of Scripture is part of the larger biblical pyramid with its various levels, applying the Bible becomes much easier. If a passage appears too specific to apply to our situation, we simply move up a level, looking for a general principle that we can apply.

### Finding General Principles

Finding general principles in a passage is the result of asking the right questions. There are three important questions to ask, especially if the passage doesn't directly apply today:

**Question 1: Does the author state a general principle?**

The passage in 1 Corinthians 8 illustrates the first and easiest way to find a general principle: simply see if the author states the principle, as Paul did in verse 9. New Testament writers often state a general principle and then give several examples of how that principle applies to
specific situations. Not all of the specifics will apply to us today, but the general principles will almost always apply because they reflect God’s character.

**Question 2: Why was this specific instruction given?** Whether an author states a general principle or not, we can often find one by looking at the command itself and the reason for it. Biblical instruction is never random; it is always an expression of a higher level in the pyramid. When we discover why a command is given, we are able to move up one or more levels in the pyramid to a principle that is applicable today.

**Question 3: Does the broader context reveal a general principle?** As we look for general principles, it is important to consider both the immediate and broader context of a passage. For example, in 1 Corinthians 8 it was a simple matter to find Paul’s general principle, since he stated it in the immediate context (v. 9). In some passages, however, it might be necessary to look at the paragraphs or chapters before or after the passage. Ultimately, the entire Bible provides the context and guiding principles for every passage within it.

*The context of the Bible* is the Grand Unifying Theme mentioned in the introduction. All biblical teaching and instruction drives toward accomplishing God’s plan of forming a loving community between Himself and His followers.

Finding general principles in Scripture is not the same as looking for proof-texts. Neither is it an attempt to tie up the truths of Scripture into neat little propositional packages. Rather, we look beyond the specific commands,
examples, and promises of Scripture in order to seek the
mind and heart of God. We want to grasp not only what
God said (although that is extremely important) but also
why He said it. Our passion is to develop a godly mindset,
a worldview that is shaped by the Grand Unifying Theme
of Scripture.

As we look for biblical principles, we are seeking to feel
God’s heartbeat in the verses, paragraphs, chapters, and
books of Scripture. With the help of the Holy Spirit, our
goal is nothing less than to discern the mind of God.

**Almost, But Not Quite**

Several years ago some seminary students were asked to
preach a sermon on the parable of the Good Samaritan.
Each student was deliberately delayed until moments before
his sermon was to begin. As each one raced frantically
across campus with text in hand, he was met by someone
posing as a person in need. Ironically, not one of them
stopped to help the person—they had an important
sermon to preach!

This section has tried to provide both a framework for
thinking about general principles and a simple method
for discovering them. However, a general principle can
simply be a pious platitude unless we take one more
vital step: We must seek to apply that principle to the
situations we face today.

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In the movie *The Gods Must Be Crazy*, a Coke bottle is thrown from an airplane and lands in a tiny community of African bush people. Because it dropped from the sky, they think the bottle is a gift from the gods.

At first this isolated tribe is puzzled by the bottle’s strange appearance. They have never seen glass before, not to mention a bottle. What is this thing good for? Yet after a while they begin to find many uses for the Coke bottle. Because of its hardness, it makes an excellent hammer for smashing roots. Because it is cylindrical, the bottle can be used as a rolling pin. They find it can even be used as a musical instrument...
if they blow into the opening. The more they think about it, the more uses they discover for the bottle.

In one sense, a biblical principle is like that Coke bottle. We know the principle is a gift from God—even if the Coke bottle isn’t. But at first we don’t know quite what to do with it. Its usefulness only becomes apparent as we think about how it can affect our lives.

Yet it is precisely at this point that many people fail. Some simply don’t take the time to reflect on how the principle might apply to the situations they face. Others make the opposite mistake of applying the principle to situations for which it was never intended. Like the bush people, they use a biblical “Coke bottle” as a rolling pin!

“If You Love Me”

Previously, we saw that Jesus taught that love for God and neighbor summarizes “all the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 22:36-40). In a culture absorbed with the details of Scripture, Jesus told the “expert in the law” to look for the big picture, the principles behind the Law. In other words, He encouraged him to move his eyes from the base of the pyramid to the pinnacle.

However, it would be wrong to assume that Jesus did not care about the specifics of Scripture. Just before He went to the cross, He told his disciples: “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments” (John 14:15, NASB). Later in the same passage, He put it another way: “Whoever has My commands and keeps them is the one who loves Me” (v. 21).

In other words, just as Jesus urged the expert in the law to move his eyes from the base of the pyramid to the pinnacle, so He urged His disciples to move from the
pinnacle back down to the base. It isn’t sufficient to love God or neighbor in the abstract. Our gratitude for what God has done for us through Jesus must be expressed in specific and concrete ways. Just as God’s love is behind every command in Scripture, so the converse is also true: Every instruction, rule, or command in Scripture is a specific way of expressing our love for God and/or our neighbor.

God’s love is behind every word of Scripture and His love for us finds its ultimate expression in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

In fact, the general principles we discover in Scripture are inseparable from the specific directions. For example, it is impossible to show that you love someone without expressing that love through patience, kindness, generosity, and so on. Likewise, it is impossible to be generous (or patient or kind) to someone without doing so in specific ways, such as giving the person food, money, clothing, or something else he or she needs. Our love and our generosity are never really expressed until they reach this tangible level.

Therefore, after we discover a general principle in Scripture by moving up one or more levels in the pyramid, we must move back down the pyramid—all the way to the base! In other words, having discovered a principle behind the situation faced by those in Scripture, we must now apply that principle to situations we face today.

**Applying General Principles**

As we seek to apply a general principle to our lives, we have two options: (1) We can apply the principle to the
Applying a principle to the identical situation. As we read the Bible, there will be times when the situation faced by the original readers is identical to our own. For example, in Ephesians 6 Paul tells his readers to “put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against...the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (vv. 11-12). Although Paul’s words are couched in the language of the first century (the imagery of Roman armor), his instruction is as vital today as it was then. Why? Because the ultimate nature of our battle has not changed in 2,000 years. We still struggle against evil spiritual forces, and our only defense is the power of God.

Likewise, when the author of Hebrews tells his readers, “Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have” (13:5), we know his words transcend the barriers of time. Money has always been an object of passion and allure. Undoubtedly, people in every age have said, “How much is enough? Just a little bit more!”

Because our situations are identical to those faced by the original audience in both passages, God’s Word to us is the same as it was to them.

Applying a principle to a comparable situation. Quite often, however, our situation is not identical to that of the original readers. In such cases we must move up a level in the pyramid, looking for a general principle we can apply to a
comparable situation. Our circumstances must be truly comparable to the original situation in order for the principle to apply. For example, the principle behind Paul’s instruction about eating food offered to idols was that we should “be careful . . . that the exercise of [our] rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak” (1 Corinthians 8:9). Unfortunately, this passage and the one similar to it in Romans 14 have been used in ways that Paul never intended.

A few years ago many churches claimed using drums and guitars in church were sinful for Christians because they were a “stumbling block” to the older generation. However, they were trying to apply Paul’s words to a situation that simply wasn’t comparable to the one in Corinth or Rome. For Paul, a stumbling block was something that “causes my brother or sister to fall into sin” (v. 13). In the case of drums and guitars, for the older generation, a “stumbling block” was something offensive or distasteful. Likewise, for Paul a “weak brother” was someone who was tempted to imitate the behavior of those who ate idol meat. But I seriously doubt that the older generation was tempted to buy a guitar or set of drums.

On the other hand, it may be correct to apply the “stumbling block” principle to the practice of drinking alcoholic beverages. If my “freedom” to drink might tempt a former alcoholic to resume a practice he cannot control, I should give up that freedom. This is comparable to the issue of eating food sacrificed to idols.

The Missing Ingredient
At times, understanding and applying the Bible may seem more mechanical than spiritual. After all, where does
God fit into this process? Has He merely left us with a set of principles to discover and obey, while He has gone away? And even if we were to uncover all the principles in Scripture about living for God, is it even remotely realistic to think that we can live up to them? Do we receive God’s grace and the gift of his Son only to be doomed to fail to live up to that grace?

Earlier in this section, I quoted Christ’s statement: “Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me” (*John 14:21*). The remainder of the verse supplies the ingredient which is missing from this discussion. Jesus goes on to say: “The one who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love them and show myself to them.” Love is the dominant force in our relationship with Jesus Christ. However, as in any relationship, love must be expressed. Jesus wants us to express our love for Him by obeying his commands—following His example of what it means to love God and neighbor. He, in turn, promises to continue to express His love for us by revealing Himself to us. Understanding and applying God’s Word allows us to know Him better, which results in even greater love and obedience. It is a beautiful cycle of reciprocal love.

Against the backdrop of the Bible’s Grand Unifying Theory of God’s loving community, our response to what we learn in Scripture—who God is, what He has done for us, and what He expects of us—should be anything but dry and lifeless. It is a warm, affectionate, even passionate means of showing Christ how much He means to us.
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