

Allusions, Images, and Symbols: How to Study Bible Prophecy

Some Principles of Prophecy

Lesson #1 for April 5, 2025

Scriptures: Jeremiah 9:24; 29:23-24; Psalm 139:1-6; Daniel 12:4; Revelation 22:10; 2 Timothy 3:15-17; Hebrews 4:12.

1. In this new series of lessons, we will do our best to understand the basic rules for interpreting prophecies in the Bible. We will review some basic principles for understanding prophecies.

[From the Bible study guide=BSG:] As with most everything else in Scripture, **Christians disagree about prophecy**, which often convinces others that Bible prophecy is a waste of time. After all, if Christians fight over every prophetic jot and tittle, how valid could it be? Unfortunately, many believers also begin to think that some books of the Bible, such as Revelation, are simply incomprehensible. Instead of reading them, they avoid them, sometimes with the encouragement of a well-meaning pastor who thinks that studying prophecy causes more problems than it solves.

It was not always so. For the first eighteen centuries of Christian history, most Christians were very comfortable with biblical prophecy, and there was a surprising level of agreement on what the key messages of the prophecies were. This is how God intended for it to be: “Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment” (*1 Cor. 1:10, NKJV*).—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** for Sabbath Afternoon, March 29.^{†§}

2. ***What is the most important tool to help understand the Bible?***

[BSG:] At the beginning of his Bible classes each semester, a seminary professor engaged his students with a simple, yet challenging, question: “What is the most important tool you have to help you understand the Bible?” The students offered what they considered were the best answers: “Bible dictionaries,” “prayer,” “the Holy Spirit,” “biblical languages” (Hebrew, Greek), “Bible software,” and so on. After listening to all their answers, the professor informed them that, while all these things were, indeed, undoubtedly helpful, there was one tool that they did not mention, which was, **besides prayer and the Holy Spirit, their most important resource of all: time.**

Undeniably, one of the most important tools needed when approaching the Scriptures is the one tool of which, all too often it would seem, we have the least: time. Once we are ready and willing to invest time in the enterprise of studying the Bible, we are then led to consider the following question: How do we read the Bible? That is, what are the principles that should guide us on the path of searching and understanding this particular Book?—*Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** 13.[†]

3. Perhaps the greatest tool for helping us interpret the Bible is the Bible itself. If one comes to a difficult passage or an unclear term or prophecy, Dr. A. Graham Maxwell said, “Keep reading!” When carefully and prayerfully studied, the Bible usually explains itself.

[BSG:] Walk into any Christian bookstore and scan through the titles on Bible ***How to Study Bible Prophecy #1*** - page 1 of 10

prophecy. You will quickly discover that there is a mind-boggling assortment of views and interpretations, and it can be tempting to believe that no one can truly understand what books such as Revelation are saying. For example, one author says the **antichrist is nothing but a metaphor; another says he is still coming in the future; and another that he was a reference to something or someone in the days of the pagan Roman Empire.** As one old preacher put it, **“Perhaps the Bible is like an old violin; you can play any tune you’d like on it.”**

The Bible itself, however, does not suggest any such thing. Instead, **it invites us to read, assuming that God is not speaking in vain and that we can know the truth of what He is saying through His Word.**—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** for Sunday, March 30.^{†‡}

4. Does God really intend for us to read and understand Scripture? Even Bible prophecy?

Matthew 24:15: [Jesus said:] “You will see ‘The Awful Horror’ of which the prophet Daniel spoke. It will be standing in the holy place.” (Note to the reader: be sure to understand what this means!)—American Bible Society. (1992). *The Holy Bible: The Good News Translation** (2nd ed., Matthew 24:15). New York: American Bible Society [abbreviated as *Good News Bible*].^{†‡}

Revelation 1:3: Happy is the one who reads this book, and happy are those who listen to the words of this prophetic message and obey what is written in this book! For the time is near when all these things will happen.—*Good News Bible.**

Matthew 11:29: “Take my yoke and put it on you, and **learn from me**, because I am gentle and humble in spirit; and you will find rest.”—*Good News Bible.*†*

Jeremiah 9:23-24: ²³ The LORD says,

“The wise should not boast of their wisdom,
nor the strong of their strength,
nor the rich of their wealth.

²⁴If anyone wants to boast,
he should boast that he knows and understands me,
because my love is constant,
and I do what is just and right.

These are the things that please me.

I, the LORD, have spoken.”—*Good News Bible.**

5. The attitude with which one approaches the Bible and Bible prophecy matters.

[BSG:] Many universities offer courses named **“The Bible as Literature”** or something similar. For the believer, it can be astonishing to sit through countless lectures, only to discover that the professor reads the Bible the same way one might read pagan mythology. The idea is that there may be a kernel of moral “truth” in the stories, but one can make of the stories whatever one wishes. **To these teachers, the idea that this book was inspired by God is laughable.**

Thus, the instructor reads the Bible but does not hear the voice of God speaking. Others come to conclusions clearly at odds with the message of the Bible. **Without being surrendered to the Lord, and without a heart open to**

learning the truth, those who read the Bible will likely come away not only missing its message but misunderstanding the loving and holy character of the God revealed in its pages. This could be easier to do than many realize, which is why just reading the Bible without the right tools and (most important) the right attitude under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, can be hurtful. Someone not known to be pious was found reading the Bible. When asked what he was doing, he responded, “**Looking for loopholes.** Looking for loopholes.” Why is that exactly the wrong attitude to have when reading God’s Word?—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** for Sunday, March 30.^{††}

6. **Does God want to be understood? Is the Bible God trying to communicate with us?**

[BSG:] **Nothing is quite as frustrating as urgently needing to communicate, perhaps at a clinic or pharmacy, while in a foreign country where you barely speak the language. You know what you need to say, but you do not have an adequate vocabulary to say it.**

With God, a different problem emerges. “ ‘For as the heavens are higher than the earth,’ ” He says, “ ‘so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts’ ” (*Isa. 55:9, NKJV*). **The problem isn’t that God doesn’t have the vocabulary to communicate with us; the problem is that we don’t have the vocabulary or intellectual capacity to understand Him fully.**—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** for Monday, March 31.^{††§}

7. Of course, we should not presume that we understand everything about God. However, we should understand that God wants us to understand Him.

Isaiah 55:9: “As high as the heavens are above the earth,
so high are my ways and thoughts above yours.”—*Good News Bible.**

8. What do the following passages suggest about God’s understanding contrasted to our own?

Psalms 139:1-6: ¹LORD, you have examined me and you know me.

²You know everything I do;

from far away you understand all my thoughts.

³You see me, whether I am working or resting;
you know all my actions.

⁴**Even before I speak,
you already know what I will say.**

⁵You are all round me on every side;
you protect me with your power.

⁶Your knowledge of me is too deep;
it is beyond my understanding.—*Good News Bible.*†*

Psalms 147:5: Great and mighty is our Lord;
his wisdom cannot be measured.—*Good News Bible.**

Romans 11:33: How great are God’s riches! How deep are his wisdom and knowledge! Who can explain his decisions? Who can understand his ways?—*Good News Bible.**

1 John 3:20: If our conscience condemns us, we know that God is greater than our conscience and that he knows everything.—*Good News Bible.**

9. Let us be clear. Understanding Bible prophecy helps us to realize that God completely understands the past, the present, and the future. This helps us understanding God.
10. Surely, we can have at least some understanding of all that God has done for us. Think of the cross, the ministry of Jesus on this earth, creation, and the entire plan of salvation.
11. While there are things we will never fully understand because God is infinite, we need to realize that **the whole purpose of the Bible is to teach us about God and His government.**
12. Below are some **basic principles for understanding prophecies in the Bible.**

[BSG:] The first five principles will focus on the text itself: **reading it candidly** (as a new text), **reading it carefully** (as an important text), **reading it esthetically** (as a beautiful text), **reading it contextually** (within its biblical setting), and **reading it intertextually** (in light of other biblical passages).—*Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** 13.††

13. The following subheadings are taken from the teachers Bible study guide as is the table below. The wording after each heading is a summarization from the Bible study guide.

Reading Candidly. Try to read the Bible, setting aside your preconceived ideas about what it says. Try to let God speak to you instead of putting words into His mouth!

Reading Carefully. Read slowly, paying attention to all the details, as far as possible. Try not to miss anything.

2 Timothy 3:14b-17: ^{14b}You know who your teachers were, ¹⁵and you remember that ever since you were a child, you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful [Footnote: All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful; or Every scripture inspired by God is also useful] for teaching the truth, rebuking error, correcting faults, and giving instruction for right living, ¹⁷so that the person who serves God may be fully qualified and equipped to do every kind of good deed.—*Good News Bible*.*†

[From the writings of Ellen G. White=EGW:] **Every part of the Bible is given by inspiration of God and is profitable. The Old Testament no less than the New should receive attention.** As we study the Old Testament we shall find living springs bubbling up where the careless reader discerns only a desert.—Ellen G. White, *Education** 191.1.††

<https://egwwritings.org/read?pannels=p29.1015&index=0>†

Reading Esthetically. Compare different parts of the Bible to see how they can help us understand the other parts. The beauty of the Bible is revealed in the themes that are weaved throughout Scripture.

Daniel 7	Revelation 13, 14
Beasts from the sea (<i>Dan. 7:1–3</i>)	Beast from the sea (<i>Rev. 13:1a</i>)
Lion (<i>Dan. 7:4</i>)	Beast with 10 horns (<i>Rev. 13:1b</i>)
Bear (<i>Dan. 7:5</i>)	Leopard (<i>Rev. 13:2a</i>)
Leopard (<i>Dan. 7:6</i>)	Bear (<i>Rev. 13:2b</i>)

Beast with 10 horns (<i>Dan. 7:7</i>)	Lion (<i>Rev. 13:2c</i>)
Usurping power—the little horn - (<i>Dan. 7:8</i>)	Usurping power—the beast from the sea (<i>Rev. 13:3–18</i>)
Day of Atonement	Three Angels' Messages
(<i>Dan. 7:9–12/Dan. 8:14</i>)	(<i>Rev. 14:1–13</i>)
Son of Man (<i>Dan. 7:13, 14</i>)	Son of Man (<i>Rev. 14:14–16</i>)

Reading Contextually. It is essential to understand, as far as possible, the context in which each passage was written. For example, Daniel 2 should be compared with Daniel 7 and 8.

Read Intertextuality. The Bible should be allowed to be its own interpreter.

14. Ellen White had some related comments:

[EGW:] Now from the light given me of God, I know that as a people we have not improved our opportunities for educating and training the youth. **We should teach them how to read and understand the Scriptures.** Wherever there is a Biblical institute for ministers and people, we should, **in connection with it, organize a class for the youth.** Their names should be registered; all should feel the importance of the scheme of educating the youth to understand the Scriptures. Let the work be taken hold of in the very simplicity of the truth itself. Lead the minds of the youth from truth to truth, up higher and higher, showing them how **Scripture interprets Scripture, one passage being the key to other passages.** Thus the Scripture itself will be the educating power, holding the thoughts in captivity to Christ.—*Letter 27a, 1892.*—Ellen G. White, *Evangelism** 581.1.*†‡

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15. In order to understand the Bible fully and correctly, we should also pay attention to **our personal response.** The following Bible study principles focus on our response to the Bible.

[BSG:] The next five principles will **focus on our response to the text** to ensure that we are listening to the Word of God: the principle of **reading the text spiritually** (as an inspired text), **reading it intelligently** (as a difficult text), **reading it corporately** (as a text for the community), **reading it existentially** (as a text that engages our lives), and **reading it ethically** (for a responsible interpretation).—*Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** 13.†‡

Reading Spiritually. The Bible should never be read without prayer. We absolutely need the help of God, the Holy Spirit, and probably our guardian angels to understand correctly what we are reading.

Reading Intelligently. We must not rule out any possibilities for understanding the words. We must recognize that **understanding God is the ultimate goal of all wisdom.**

Reading Corporately. It is absolutely essential in trying to understand Scripture that we compare what we have learned with what others have learned to give us a more nearly full picture of God.

2 Peter 1:20: Above all else, however, remember that **no one can explain by himself**
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or herself a prophecy in the Scriptures.—*Good News Bible*.^{*†}

Reading Existentially. Unless the Scriptures change us and affect our lives, we will not understand them.

[BSG:] To illustrate this point, we would do well to consider a story about a European tourist in Africa who mocked his African servant because he was reading the Bible: “Why do you read the Bible?” The [tourist] then added, “This is just a bunch of fairy tales.” The African servant responded: “If I had not read the Bible, I would have already eaten you.”—*Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** 16.‡

Hebrews 4:12: The word of God is alive and active, sharper than any double-edged sword. It cuts all the way through, to where soul and spirit meet, to where joints and marrow come together. It judges the desires and thoughts of the heart.—*Good News Bible*.*

Reading Ethically. Understanding biblical principles having read all of the Bible teaches us to read each portion ethically. While slavery was common in the Old Testament, there is no justification for things like slavery or apartheid in our day. Many people realizing what the Jews did to Jesus, justify their anti-Semitism. That is not ethical. Nor is male dominance over women.

16. After reading Genesis 3:16, many people have claimed that men should rule over women.

Genesis 3:16: And he said to the woman, “I will increase your trouble in pregnancy and your pain in giving birth. In spite of this, you will still have desire for your husband, yet you will be subject to him.”—*Good News Bible*.*

17. With that background of the general principles of the study of Bible prophecies, **let us now turn to some other aspects of Bible prophecy.**

18. So, how should we understand words such as those found in Daniel 12:4? Are there Bible texts that help us to interpret those words?

Daniel 12:4: He said to me, “And now, Daniel, close the book and put a seal on it until the end of the world. **Meanwhile, many people will waste their efforts trying to understand what is happening.**”—*Good News Bible*.^{*†}

19. The last phrase in Daniel 12:4 is similar to the last phrase in Amos 8:12.

Amos 8:11-12: ¹¹ “The time is coming when I will send famine on the land. People will be hungry, but not for bread; they will be thirsty, but not for water. **They will hunger and thirst for a message from the LORD. I, the Sovereign LORD, have spoken.** ¹²**People will wander from the Dead Sea to the Mediterranean and then on from the north to the east. They will look everywhere for a message from the LORD, but they will not find it.**”—*Good News Bible*.^{*†}

Revelation 22:10: And he said to me, “Do not keep the prophetic words of this book a secret, because the time is near when all this will happen.”—*Good News Bible*.*

20. Is it possible that all people in the world will come to understand a little bit about the books of Daniel and Revelation? Somehow, everyone will finally make a decision about whom to

worship, God or the Devil. (See Revelation 12-14.)

21. There are a number of predictions, starting from the book of Joel and continuing with passages like Matthew 24, talking about great events which will happen as we get close to the end of history.
22. **A “great religious awakening” occurred after the great Lisbon earthquake (1755), the dark day and the moon “turning to blood” (1780), the end of the 1260-day prophecy and the capture of the pope (1798), and the “falling of the stars” (1833). People realized that these things had been prophesied in the Bible.**

[BSG:] Over the centuries, many fine Christian thinkers attempted to explain the book of Daniel, and some made great headway. **Understanding of Daniel increased rapidly, however, after the end of the 1,260–year prophecy, which ended in 1798, when multiple expositors around the globe started concluding that something spectacular was going to happen around 1843.** The most notable of these, however, was William Miller, whose preaching launched the Great Advent Movement of the nineteenth century and began a chain of events that would give birth to the “remnant” church and a clear[er] understanding of the three angels’ messages.

The birth of our global movement, in other words, is a fulfillment of Daniel’s prediction that “knowledge shall increase” at “the time of the end.”

In contrast, and without judging people’s salvation, think about the “darkness” that so much of Christendom exists in. Something as basic as the seventh-day Sabbath, established in Eden, is ignored, even dismissed, in favor of Sunday, a day rooted in Roman paganism. Or think of the utter ignorance about death, with the vast majority of Christians believing the pagan idea that the dead immediately go soaring off to another existence, which for some means an eternally burning hell.

In contrast, we should be thankful—and humbled—by the knowledge of the truth.—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** for Tuesday, April 1.^{†‡}

23. Seventh-day Adventists owe a great deal to William Miller. He decided in the early 1800s to sit down with his Bible and start reading from Genesis 1:1 and not moving on to the next verse until he felt that he fully understood what was in that first verse. Among us Adventists, he is famous for interpreting Daniel 8 and 9, especially Daniel 8:14.
24. How do you relate to Bible prophecies? Consider these passages as well as 2 Timothy 3:15-17 as quoted above and below:

Matthew 5:18: “Remember that as long as heaven and earth last, not the least point nor the smallest detail of the Law will be done away with — not until the end of all things.”—*Good News Bible*.*

Luke 24:27: And **Jesus explained to them what was said about himself in all the Scriptures**, beginning with the books of Moses and the writings of all the prophets.—*Good News Bible*.*[†]

25. How do we put together the “picture of God” from the Bible?

[BSG:] In some ways, studying the Bible is not unlike assembling a large jigsaw puzzle. If you gather just two or three pieces together, it is nearly impossible to

discern the entire picture. Perhaps in those two or three pieces, you can see a horse, and so you conclude that you are assembling a picture of horses. But a few more pieces reveal a chicken and a cow, and then once you have assembled hundreds of pieces, you can finally see that you have been working on a picture of a landscape, which includes a city, a farm, and a range of mountains in the distance.

One of the central ways in which some Christians err in their study of the Bible is that they treat the Scriptures as a loose collection of sayings or proverbs that they can use to address a specific situation. Some will turn to the simple study guide at the front of a Gideons Bible, where they can find helpful verses on a number of topics, and assume that it represents the sum total of the Bible's teachings on a given subject.—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** for Wednesday, April 2.[‡]

26. During the summer between finishing college and entering medical school, Dr. Hart and a friend traveled to Europe. Stopping in New York City, they visited the famous church of Norman Vincent Peale. He preached an entire sermon on 2 Chronicles 20:20.

2 Chronicles 20:20: “Put your trust in the LORD your God and you will stand firm. Believe what his prophets tell you and you will succeed.”—*Good News Bible*.*

27. However, he stated that the entire passage was from Colossians 20:20, a chapter which does not exist! Dr. Hart and his friend wrote a letter to his church, pointing out this discrepancy. They received a form letter which said: “We hope you will visit our church again the next time you’re in New York City!” The letter ignored the error in the citation that was pointed out. Likely, the sermon was stated to be from a New Testament book because so many people believe that the Old Testament has been “done away with.”

28. Unfortunately, many books have been written about Bible prophecy which are clearly not correct. They prophesied things to come; however, those things never happened. **The only safety is in taking all of Scripture and comparing passage with passage.** Of course, critics think that approach is too time-consuming and too much trouble!

[BSG:] One of the key issues students of prophecy need to deal with is how to determine whether the language of the Bible is to be taken literally or figuratively. How does one determine if the author was using symbolic language, and how does one know what the symbol represents? **The crucial way to do this is to see how that figure, the symbol, has been used all through the Bible, as opposed to looking at how a symbol is used in contemporary times.** For example, some see the bear symbol in Daniel 7 as pointing to Russia, because that image is often used today as a symbol of Russia. This is not a sound or safe way to interpret prophetic symbolism.—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** for Thursday, April 3.^{††}

29. Daniel 7&8 and Revelation are full of beasts without a clear, immediate explanation of what those beasts represent. **However, if we read all of the Bible and look at verses that tell us how to interpret certain things, the issues will become clear.** *Horns* represent political powers or nations. A *sword* can symbolize the Word of God. A *woman* can symbolize the church, either a pure woman or a prostitute woman.

1 Peter 5:13: Your sister church in Babylon, also chosen by God, sends you greetings, and so does my son Mark.—*Good News Bible*.* [Footnote: Babylon: *As in the book of Revelation, this probably refers to Rome.*]‡

30. What was Peter referring to when he mentioned Babylon?

31. Why do you think God has used so many different symbols and allusions in speaking to His prophets and to us? Using the term *Babylon* to refer to Rome in the writings of John in the book of Revelation may have been to prevent the guards at his prison on the Isle of Patmos from realizing that he was talking about Rome.

32. The ones who read and understand Revelation and Daniel will be blessed.

[EGW:] Ministers and people declared that the prophecies of Daniel and the Revelation were incomprehensible mysteries. But Christ directed His disciples to the words of the prophet Daniel concerning events to take place in their time, and said: “Whoso readeth, **let him understand.**” Matthew 24:15. And the assertion that the Revelation is a mystery, not to be understood, is contradicted by the very title of the book: “The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto Him, to show unto His servants things which must shortly come to pass.... **Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein:** for the time is at hand.” Revelation 1:1-3....

In view of the testimony of Inspiration, how dare men teach that the Revelation is a mystery beyond the reach of human understanding? **It is a mystery revealed**, a book opened. The study of the Revelation directs the mind to the prophecies of Daniel, and both present most important instruction, given of God to men, concerning events to take place at the close of this world’s history.

To John were opened scenes of deep and thrilling interest in the experience of the church. He saw the position, dangers, conflicts, and final deliverance of the people of God. He records the closing messages which are to ripen the harvest of the earth, either as sheaves for the heavenly garner or as fagots for the fires of destruction. Subjects of vast importance were revealed to him, especially for the last church, that those who should turn from error to truth might be instructed concerning the perils and conflicts before them. None need be in darkness in regard to what is coming upon the earth.—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy** 341.1-342.0.‡§

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33. Ellen White emphasized that we should study and comprehend Revelation and Daniel.

[EGW:] **When the books of Daniel and Revelation are better understood, believers will have an entirely different religious experience.** They will be given such glimpses of the open gates of heaven, that heart and mind will be impressed in regard to the character all must develop in order to realize the blessedness which is to be the reward of the pure in heart. The Lord will bless all who will seek humbly and meekly to understand that which is revealed in the Revelation. This book contains so much that is large with immortality and full of glory that all who read and search it earnestly receive the blessing to those “that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written

therein.” [Revelation 1:3.] *Letter 16, 1900*,* par. 9 [15LtMs]; *Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers**€ 114.3-4.†‡Ω

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34. Have you found that understanding Bible prophecy, especially from Daniel and Revelation, has given you a broader and deeper understanding of the entire Bible?

35. Try this exercise suggested in the Bible study guide: Again read 2 Timothy 3:15-17.

2 Timothy 3:15-17: ¹⁵ And that from childhood you have known the **Holy Scriptures**, which are able to make you **wise** for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.

¹⁶ All Scripture *is given* by inspiration of God, and *is* profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, ¹⁷ that the man of God may be **complete**, thoroughly equipped for every good work.—*New King James Version*.*†§ [Remember that in the *King James Version* and in the *New King James Version* of the Bible, words in italics are supplied by the translators; they are not directly translated from the original language.][‡]

36. What can you learn by paying careful attention to the text (2 Timothy 3:15-17)?

[BSG:] What are the keywords of 2 Timothy 3:15–17? Discuss and reflect on the importance of the following words: “Scriptures,” “wise,” “given,” “complete.” Why does the study of Scripture inspire creative thinking? What is the structure of this text? What is the context of this passage? Find two other biblical texts with the same theme (for example, Psalm 119:97–104 and John 5:39). Identify the parallels between these texts and compare and contrast their themes. How are they the same or different?—*Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** 17.[‡]

37. We must always approach the Scripture with reverence. We must, in order to be wise, realize that it is primarily a message from God to us about Him and His kingdom. As always, when you think you have discovered something new when reading the Bible, talk to others that you think understand the Bible, and ask them to give their feedback.

38. In this series of lessons, we will learn some very interesting things which will require thought, prayer, and consultation with others.

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