
How to Read and Apply the Bible

Step 2: Interpretation

Key Question: What does the text mean?

Note: Much of this lesson material comes from the book *Living By the Book* by Howard and William Hendricks. I commend this resource to you for further study; see the full citation on the course overview.

The Value of Interpretation

- If observation is excavation, then interpretation is erecting the structure. The structure is built on the foundation of what we've observed.
- Why is interpretation necessary?
 - **Language barriers.** The Bible was written in Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic. Although we have many faithful translations, understanding how words were used in the original languages can help unlock understanding.
 - **Cultural barriers.** Scriptures were written to particular people in particular places at particular times. While the truths of course transfer to all places and times, to understand Scripture we must reconstruct the context of communication, transportation, trade, religion, etc.
 - **Literary barriers.** The Bible is comprised of many different literary forms and genres. We can't understand the Psalms by using the same logic we use reading Romans, and the point of parables won't become apparent through the word studies that may help in understanding Galatians.
 - **Communication barriers.** Even with words in our language and context explained, it is still sometimes difficult to understand a text.
 - **1 Corinthians 13:12** ¹²*For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.*

Pitfalls of Interpretation

- **Misreading a text.** It's possible to misread what a text is saying and thus draw the wrong conclusions. This is why observation is a critical first step before interpretation.
 - **Psalms 37:4** ⁴*Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.*

- **Distorting the text.** We must be careful not to take a text and distort its meaning by neglecting careful study.
 - **Colossians 1:15** ¹⁵*He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.*
- **Subjectivism.** We don't come to the Bible as a mystically subjective text. Instead, we know that God is communicating something to us, and thus truth can be found through the faculties of reason and understanding and through the illumination of the Holy Spirit.
- **Relativism.** Similar to subjectivism, we must work hard against inserting personal or societal biases into our understanding of a text. Additionally, the text does not change meaning over time, though applications may vary over time.
 - **1 Corinthians 15:1-6** ¹ *Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, ² and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. ³ For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. ⁶ Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep...*
 - **Example Question:** What is the importance of the resurrection in this passage? Does it matter if you believe it is an actual, historical event, or is it sufficient to merely believe that “Jesus is alive in your heart?”
- **Overconfidence.** We must guard ourselves from thinking we've ever mastered a portion of Scripture. If we come to the text assuming we have nothing to learn, we won't.

Genre and Meaning

- Key to understanding a text's meaning is to understand the author's intent in writing. What kind of literature is being used, and what implications does this have for interpreting the meaning?
- **Six Genres to Consider**
 - **Exposition.** A straightforward argument or explanation of a body of truth. The main focus is appealing to the mind, specifically logic and reason. This genre typically employs a tight structure, moving from point to point.
 - **Narrative and Biography.** The telling of the story of a historical account. As you read the stories, consider the plot, the presentation of the individual people involved, what questions are raised and answered as the story is unfolded, what lessons are learned, etc.
 - **Parables.** A parable is a brief story that illustrates a moral principal. Parables and allegories are fictional and typically communicate a main truth. Care must be given to not over-allegorize the details beyond their intended purpose.

- **Poetry.** Poetry is the intentional use of artistic elements, including structure, rhythm, rhyme, and other tools, to appeal to emotion. Many of the Psalms, for example, are Hebrew poetry that were intended to be sung, not read. A basic understanding of poetic structures can help unlock the meaning of a text. Parallelism is an example in the Psalms.
 - Reinforced meaning: The meaning of the first line is reinforced by the second.
 - **Psalm 103:15** *As for man, his days are like grass; as a flower of the field, so he flourishes.*
 - Extended meaning: The meaning is extended with new information.
 - **Psalm 32:2** *Blessed is the man against whom the Lord counts no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.*
 - Alternative thought: The meaning is nuanced with an opposing or alternative idea.
 - **Psalm 40:4** *Blessed is the man who makes the Lord his trust, who does not turn to the proud, to those who go astray after a lie!*
 - Hyperbole: Making a point through extreme or exaggerated language.
 - **Psalm 42:3** *My tears have been my food day and night, while they say to me all the day long, "Where is your God?"*
- **Proverbs & Wisdom.** Wisdom literature is writing that expresses the insights and lessons learned of the author for the benefit of others, specifically the less-experienced. Examples include Proverbs and the book of Ecclesiastes. Interpretation can be challenging given that often a general principle is being asserted, not an absolute certainty.
 - **Proverbs 21:17** *He who loves pleasure will become a poor man; he who loves wine and oil will not become rich.*
 - **Proverbs 22:6** *Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it.*
- **Prophetic and Apocalyptic.** Prophecy is the forth-telling of God's Word to his people, sometimes including the prediction of the future, and often including warnings of judgement for continuance in sin. To rightly understand prophecy, you must recreate the situation in which it was given, including asking questions like: What problem is the prophet addressing? What images are used to describe it? What is the response of the people? What does this tell us about God? What was the response of the people?

Keys to Interpretation

- **Content** – Consider all you learned about a text as you engaged in observation: the terms, structure, literary form, atmosphere, and location in redemptive history.
- **Context** – Context is the situation in which you find a particular passage literarily, historically, culturally, geographically, and theologically.
 - **Literary Context:** What’s happening before and after this text at the paragraph, chapter, and book levels?
 - **Historical Context:** What’s happening at the time during which this passage is written? Where and how does it fit into the grand redemptive narrative?
 - **Cultural Context:** From what and into what culture was this text written?
 - **Geographic Context:** In what geographical setting does the passage take place?
 - **Theological Context:** What did this author know about God? What was the relationship between his readers and God? How did people worship God at that point? What other competing religions and/or worldviews were present?
- **Comparison** – How does this passage of Scripture fit with other passages of Scripture? How are words used similar or different from how they’re used elsewhere? Let Scripture interpret Scripture! We must remember that while the Bible was written by men, its primary author was the Holy Spirit.
 - **Example:** Consider the word “equip” in Ephesians 4:11-12. “Equip” is used three ways in Scripture, (1) the mending of nets, (2) the setting of bones, and (3) the outfitting of a ship for a journey. In our day we often only focus on the third meaning, and not the “repairing” or “healing” aspects of “equipping the saints for the work of the ministry”.
- **Culture** – What worldviews, societal expectations, governmental structures, languages, and religions are in view for both the author and his audience? Understanding the culture in a text helps us to avoid interpreting Scripture with our own cultural biases or misunderstanding it completely).
 - **Example:** Meat sacrificed to idols in 1 Corinthians 8. Why was this an issue then, and how might that affect our understanding of that passage?
- **Consultation** – Consultation is the use of secondary sources to confirm or sharpen one’s understanding of the text. For example, consider using the following tools as aides in interpreting Scripture:
 - **Concordance** – An index of words used in the Bible. *Example: Strong’s Concordance.*
 - **Bible Dictionaries** – A dictionary that focuses on providing the background on important Scriptural words. *Example: An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words by W. E. Vine.*
 - **Atlas** – A book of maps and charts that provides the geographical context for a text. *Example: Macmillan Bible Atlas.*

- **Commentaries** - Meditations and explanations of Biblical texts by pastors and/or scholars. Commentaries come in multiple varieties, including pastoral and technical. Commentaries should only be used as aids; be careful not to replace your own study with that of another!

Handling Figurative Language

- The Bible is filled with figurative language. How can we approach these texts faithfully?
- Below are 10 principles from *Living by the Book* that are a helpful starting point for interpreting figurative language.

1. Use the literal sense unless there is good reason not to.

- a. Remember that the authors were rational people who communicated similar to us. Don't over-spiritualize a text in favor of its plain reading.

2. Use the figurative sense when the passage tells you to.

- a. Sometimes the text will tell us in advance to be mindful of imagery. For example, In Genesis 37 Joseph is given information via a dream.

3. Use the figurative sense if a literal meaning is impossible or absurd.

- a. God wants to tell us something through his Word and doesn't shroud its meaning in mysticism. However, often symbols are used to make points, and we ought to read them as symbols.
- b. For example, consider: **Revelation 1:16** *In his right hand he held seven stars, and coming out of his mouth was a sharp, double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.*

4. Use the figurative sense if a literal meaning would involve something immoral.

- a. Sometimes the way to discern a metaphor is to consider it's implications morally. For example:
- b. **John 6:53-55** ⁵³ *Jesus said to them, "Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you."* ⁵⁴ *Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day.* ⁵⁵ *For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink.*

5. Use the figurative sense if the expression is an obvious figure of speech.

- a. Sometimes there's a signal that the expression is figurative, like similes introducing a phrases with "like" or "as". Other times it's clear a poetic device is being used, even without a signal.
- b. Paul is using a device called "apostrophe", addressing a thing as if it were a person in **1 Corinthians 15:55** *"O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?"*

- 6. Use the figurative sense if a literal interpretation goes contrary to the context and scope of the passage.**
 - a. For example, consider Revelation 5:1-15 where Jesus is described as the “Lion of the tribe of Judah”. A literal beast is not in view, since that’s apparent from the context of the passage.
- 7. Use the figurative sense if a literal interpretation goes contrary to the general character and style of the book.**
 - a. *Psalm 63:7 ...for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I will sing for joy.* (God does not actually have wings).
- 8. Use the figurative sense if a literal interpretation goes contrary to the plan and purposes of the author.**
 - a. This principle helps us avoid interpreting a figure of one speech in such a way that sounds plausible in isolation but heretical in context.
 - b. For example, is Psalm 1 supporting the prosperity gospel when it asserts in 1:3 that the man who follows God’s Word will prosper in whatever he does?
- 9. Use the figurative sense if a literal interpretation involves a contradiction of other Scripture.**
 - a. For example, when Jesus said “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” in Mark 10:25, is he saying it’s impossible for a rich person to go to heaven, as the disciples themselves wondered? (vs. 26)
- 10. Use the figurative sense if a literal interpretation would involve a contradiction in doctrine.**
 - a. Consider 1 Corinthians 13:16-17; is this passage teaching that committing suicide is an automatic forfeiture of salvation? Among other interpretive keys that this is not the case, one is that it contradicts the doctrine of eternal security (Ephesians 1).

Interpretation: What Does this Text Mean?

- After working through the considerations above, how can we summarize what we've learned regarding the meaning?
- **Questions to ask to discern the meaning:**
 - **What do I learn about God?** What aspects of his character, conduct, and concerns are present? What activity do I see from all persons of the Trinity?
 - **What do I learn about people?** How is our fallen condition described or implied? What does this passage reveal about living as those who have been redeemed by Christ?
 - **What do I learn about relating to God?** What is praiseworthy about God in this text? What sins do I need to confess to God? What promises do I need to believe given by God? For what can I give God thanks?
 - **What do I learn about relating to others?** What does the passage reveal about interacting with others in this text?
- Try to summarize the meaning of the text with one or two sentences.

Practice: Romans 8:1-11

Preceding Context:

¹ There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

² For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.

³ For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴ in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

⁵ For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit.

⁶ For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.

⁷ For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. ⁸ Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

⁹ You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.

¹⁰ But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. ¹¹ If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.

Following Context: