

## Understanding and Interpreting the Bible

### Day 1:

When it comes to making claims about what the Bible means, sometimes we hear comments from Christians or non-Christians like the following: “Well, that’s just your interpretation.” “The Bible can be made to say anything you want.” “You can’t really understand the Bible. It is full of contradictions.” “No one can understand the true meaning of *anything anyone* says.” Or, someone sitting in a Bible study might say, “This is what the Bible means to me.” All of these types of comments are about principles of biblical interpretation also called in theological jargon hermeneutics.

Some issues that we as Christians face regarding the topic of biblical interpretation include: How does divine inspiration and human authorship affect biblical interpretation? What does a text mean? What are some general principles of interpretation? How do we interpret the Old Testament? How do we interpret the New Testament? These are all critical questions for us to consider as we seek to become better interpreters of God’s word, the Bible.

### What Does a Text Mean?

There are certain implications for biblical interpretation that we have to consider. The first is that the human authors had a specific historical audience, context and purpose. These authors used their own language, writing methods, style of writing and literary form of writing. The divine authorship of the Bible gives it its unity and the ultimate source of all interpretation is from God. In the book of Genesis Joseph was asked about the meaning of some divinely given dreams and he replied, “Don’t interpretations belong to God? (Gen 40:8).

*"We both had dreams," they answered, "but there is no one to interpret them." Then Joseph said to them, "Do not interpretations belong to God? Tell me your dreams."*

So let’s just start with the most basic question. What does a text mean? The answer to this question is that *a text means what the author intended it to mean*. For example, if you wrote a letter with some statements in it that are a little ambiguous, then what does the letter mean? Does it mean what you intended it to mean or how the readers interpret it? Of course it means what you intended it to mean. The true meaning of a text resides in the authorial intent of the text. This leads us to the first principle of interpreting the Bible.

### General Ideas for Biblical Interpretation

**Idea 1: Interpretation must be based on the author’s intention of meaning and not the reader.** This means we must get into the author’s context, historically, grammatically, culturally and the literary forms and conventions the author was working in. Which is why tools like, study Bibles and Commentaries can be so helpful. When someone states what a verse means to him, we need to redirect and clarify that the meaning is what the author intended. After that the question then is how that historical meaning applies to us today.

### Thoughts?

## Day 2:

**Idea 2: Interpretations must be done in the context of the passage.** What does the following mean? “It was a ball.” Well, the answer depends on the context. Consider the following sentences: The baseball umpire saw the pitch drift to the outside and said, “it was a ball.” We went to the dance last night, in fact it was so formal “it was a ball.” As I was walking along the golf course I spotted something small and white in the tall grass, “it was a ball.” I had so much fun at the game night, “it was a ball.” In each case the word *ball* means something different. So, *context determines meaning!* The context must give the most weight in interpretation. First, there is the context of the sentence, then the paragraph, then the section and then the book and even author. The interpreter should look at all these circles of context to be able to correctly understand the meaning.

Far too often people try to interpret a verse by itself in isolation without looking at the context itself. For example, consider the verse Revelation 3:20 which is sometimes used as an illustration for evangelism.

*Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me*

If this is all you looked at, it would be easy to understand the verse in terms of someone asking Jesus into his or her life for the first time. But the context in the preceding verse (v. 19) is talking about discipline of those whom Jesus loves, which would most naturally refer to believers. Also, in looking at the larger paragraph the passage is to a church (Rev 3:14, 22).

*“To the angel of the church in Laodicea write: These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God’s creation. Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”*

The verse is really addressed to believers who need to repent from their sin and return to fellowship with God.

**Idea 3: Interpret the Bible literally (or normally) allowing for normal use of figurative language.** Take the plain meaning of the text at face value. When the literal does not make sense you probably have a figure of speech. For example, Isaiah 55:12 states the trees of the field will clap their hands. Since trees do not have hands or clap this must be a figure of speech. Look for words such as “like” or “as” which can also communicate a figure of speech. Figures of speech and illustrations give the Bible a powerful and colorful means of expression. They are an important part of the normal expression of language.

**Thoughts?**

### Day 3:

**Idea 4: *Use the Bible to help interpret itself.*** Interpret difficult passages with clear ones. Which is sometimes called the law of non-contradiction. Because the Bible is God's word, and God is true, the Bible will not contradict itself. For example, there are clear passages that teach the doctrine of eternal security, that once a person is truly saved he or she cannot lose salvation (John 5; Rom 8). Some passages in the Bible are very hard to interpret like Hebrews 6:4-6. So I would let the clear theology of the Bible influence me that a very hard passage like Hebrews 6 is not teaching that someone can lose his salvation. We can also, use the New Testament to help interpret the Old Testament. There is a progressive nature to revelation, meaning, The Bible is giving more revelation on topics over time. But we have to start by interpreting the Old Testament text in its context before a New Testament revelation can be applied.

**Idea 5: *Interpretation must be distinguished from application.*** While there is one interpretation that is historical, there are many applications that can be carried over to our modern context. You can Build an application bridge from the interpretation to the timeless principle and then to how do I apply this now. For example in John 12, Mary anoints Jesus with very expensive oil. The historical context records a historical event. The interpretation relates only to what Mary did to Jesus. What about us today? An application might be that we are willing to give sacrificially for the Lord's work and give Jesus acts of worship as Mary did. Or another example, when Jesus states the idea in Matt 7 to love one's enemies it is a general command that I might apply specifically by loving a co-worker who undermines me or a neighbor who offends me.

**Idea 6: *Be sensitive to distinctions between Israel and the church and Old Covenant and New Covenant eras and requirements.*** Promises made to Israel in the Old Testament cannot automatically be transferred to the church in which we are a part of today. For example, the land promises were given to Abraham and his descendants (Gen 12:7) but that does not include me, a Gentile Christian. Also, Christians are not under the requirements of the Mosaic law (Rom 6:14). For example, in Lev 19:19 there is a command "you must not wear a garment made of two different kinds of fabric." This was a binding command under the Mosaic law but not under the terms of the New Covenant. It is true that certain Old Testament commands repeated in the New Testament are still binding, but this is made clear by their repetition in the New Testament. The church was formed in Acts 2 with the descent of the Holy Spirit and most direct statements to and about the church occur after that.

**Idea 7: *Be sensitive to the type of literature you are in.*** The Bible contains many different types of literature: law, narrative, wisdom, poetry, gospel, parable, epistle, and apocalyptic. Each of these types of literature has specific features that must be considered when interpreting a text, which we will look at more closely the next couple of days. For now we need to understand that where we are in the Bible makes a big difference on how we interpret and apply it.

## Day 4:

### Interpreting the Old Testament

**Narrative Literature:** Much of the Old Testament contains narrative literature. The passage should be interpreted in its historical context and then applications can be drawn from the characters and events. In the book of Judges, only one verse is given to the judge Shamgar. It reads,

*“After Ehud came Shamgar son of Anath; he killed six hundred Philistines with an oxgoad<sup>3</sup> and he too delivered Israel” (Judges 3:31).*

Why did God include this passage? Yes, it records a historical event. Also, the verse teaches God’s delivering power can come in an unexpected way, not with a mighty army but with one man wielding an oxgoad!

**Law:** As Christians we are not under the law as a legal system (Rom 6:14) but we are to fulfill the principles that stand behind the law of loving God and loving one’s neighbor. Sometimes the teaching is carried directly into the New Testament (for example, Do not murder, etc). Other times, the New Testament takes a text and applies a principle from it. For example, *“You must not muzzle your ox when it is treading grain”* (Deut 25:4). Paul takes this verse, which refers to feeding a work animal and applies the principle of the Christian worker being worthy of actual tangible support. Paul states, *“Elders who provide effective leadership must be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard in speaking and teaching. For the scripture says, ‘Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain,’ and, ‘The worker deserves his pay’”* (1 Tim 5:17-18, 1 Cor 9:9). In general, if the Old Testament command in the law is not repeated in the New Testament, look for the principle behind the statement in the law and then try to apply that instead.

**Wisdom Literature:** most of proverbs type of wisdom in the Old Testament is general truth based on observations but not absolute truths or promises. Two good examples are seen in the following: *“A gentle response turns away anger, but a harsh word stirs up wrath”* ([Prov 15:1](#)). Another one is, *“Train a child in the way that he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it”* ([Prov 22:6](#)). Christians should not take these types of proverbs as promises of what will **always** happen but instead patterns that are generally true outcomes based on observation. A gentle answer will not always prevent an angry outburst but it is much more likely to than a harsh one. Christian parents who have a child who has gone astray from the faith may have done their best to train the child the right way but the child did not take it.

**Poetry:** Poetry often makes greater use of figurate language than narrative or law. Also, Hebrew poetry’s main characteristic is parallelism. For example, Psalm 24 says, *“The Lord owns the earth and all it contains, the world and all who live in it. For he set its foundation upon the seas, and established it upon the ocean currents. Who is allowed to ascend the mountain of the Lord? Who may go up to his holy dwelling place?”* (Ps 24:1-3). Here we have three sets of pairs in side by side fashion with the second reference restating the basic idea of the first. The phrase “the earth and all it contains” is amplified by the phrase “the world and all who live in it”. The phrase “he sets its foundation upon the seas” is rephrased “established it upon the ocean currents.” The question of who is allowed to ascend to the mountain of the Lord is restated “Who may go up to his Holy Dwelling place?” Most English Bible translations will format poetry using indentation, which helps show the parallel ideas.

## Day 5

### Interpreting the New Testament

**Gospels:** Each Gospel writer has a *specific audience* that he is writing for, and he has selected his material for them. Matthew was written for a Jewish audience. Mark was written for a Roman audience. Luke was written for a Greek audience. John was written for a universal or Gentile audience. This can help us see nuances or explain differences between accounts. For example, in Matthew 19:1-12 and Mark 10:1-12 Jesus teaches on the hard topic of divorce. Both gospels state that a man who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her. Mark though, adds the point that if a woman divorces her husband and marries another she commits adultery against him. Why is this difference there? It probably has to do with the audience. Matthew is writing to a Jewish culture in which a woman could not divorce her husband while Mark is writing to a Roman audience in which one could.

Read the gospels not only *vertically*, that is, understanding what is said in each individual account, but also *horizontally*, that is, considering why one account follows another. For example, see [Mark 2-3:6](#); what do these various accounts have in common?

Also, recognize that the gospels are in a transitional stage between Old and New Covenants. Jesus lived in the context of Judaism prior to the birth of the church. Jesus is keeping the Old Testament prescribed feasts in many of his journeys to Jerusalem. He is also introducing changes that will be inaugurated with the start of the New Covenant. As an example, Mark 7 Jesus declared all foods clean which was a change from the Old Testament dietary laws.

**Parables.** Parables are a form of figurative speech. They are stories that are used to illustrate a truth. There are parables in different parts of the Bible but Jesus was the master of them and many are found in the gospels (Matt 13, Mark 4, Luke 15). How should we interpret the parables? *First, determine the context that prompted the parable.* Parables always come from a context. For example, the Pharisees disdain for Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners prompts Jesus to tell a parable about how God loves a lost sinner who repents (Luke 15). *Second, understand the story's natural meaning which is often taken from real life situations in first century Palestine.* *Third, ascertain the main point or truth the parable is trying to give and focus on that.* Only interpret the details of the parables if they can be validated from the passage. Many details are there only for the setting of the story. For example, what is the main point of the mustard seed parable? Jesus stated: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. It is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest garden plant and becomes a tree, so that the wild birds come and nest in its branches" (Matt 13:31-32). The parable is an illustration of the kingdom of heaven which starts small but grows to be very large in size. This seems to be the main point. The birds and the branches are probably there only to illustrate how large the tree has become.

**Acts.** Acts is a theologized history of the early church. Acts tells what the church was doing from the human side of things and what God was doing from the divine side of things. Look at these passages on the early growth of the church which refer to the same event but from two different perspectives. "So those who accepted his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand people were added". . . (Acts 2:41) "And the Lord was adding to their number everyday those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47).

Here we see what God is doing in and through the church. Also, we need to recognize that the church starts in Acts 2 with the baptism of the Holy Spirit. The baptism of the Spirit, the filling of the Spirit, church planting and gospel outreach characterize the events of the book. In addition, some events in Acts are **descriptive** of what happened not **proscriptive** of what is necessarily expected in the modern church. For example, Samaritan believers did not receive the Holy Spirit in Acts 8 upon faith in Jesus. They had to wait for Peter and John to get there. When Paul was bitten by a viper in Malta, yet he miraculously lived (Acts 28:1-5). These are descriptions of what happened and are not necessarily normative of what happens in the church today. So it probably would not be a good idea to start snake handling services!

**Epistles.** Since the New Testament epistles are directed to churches and individuals in the church, they most directly apply to us today. Most commands given in the epistles are general enough in nature that we need to obey them, or in the case of promises we can claim them. Like in 1 Corinthians 15 there is a promise given for immortal bodies and eventual victory over death. These promises are not just for those in the local Corinthian church but the universal church of God.

In the epistles, pay special attention to logical connectors/conjunctions to explore relationships of clauses and sentences. Look for these types of words: “for,” “therefore,” “but,” etc. Like in Hebrews 12:1, *“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, we must get rid of every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and run with endurance the race set out for us.”* The word *therefore* points back to the previous chapter in which Old Testament saints were held up as people who had given a good testimony or witness of faith. The phrase “cloud of witnesses” then would naturally point back to the people of the earlier chapter. In another example the author of Hebrews writes, *“So since we are receiving an unshakable kingdom, let us give thanks, and through this let us offer worship pleasing to God in devotion and awe. For our God is indeed a devouring fire”* (Heb 12:28-29). Here the word *for* sets up a subordinate idea giving the reason we as Christians should offer worship in devotion and awe to God.

**Revelation.** Revelation is the one book in the New Testament that is one of the hardest to interpret. There are several reasons for this. First, there are substantially different interpretative approaches on the overall timing of the book. Some see most of it as purely historical. Some see most of it as future. Second, there are many Old Testament allusions in Revelation. Allusions are phrases and references to the Old Testament without an explicit statement by John that he is quoting the Old Testament. So when John refers to the Old Testament he generally does not tell you he is doing so. Third, there is a greater use of symbolic language in Revelation than in other parts of the Bible. Revelation is in a form of literature known as apocalyptic.

## **Conclusion**

Biblical passages must be interpreted according to the intention of the author and in the context in which the statement is made. Interpretation must be distinguished from application. One must be sensitive to what type of literature one is in and how this may or may not apply to a believer in the church age. Interpreting the Bible is sometimes hard work but it’s always worth the cost. David reminds us of the value of God’s word, *“They are of greater value than gold, than even a great amount of pure gold; they bring greater delight than honey, than even the sweetest honey from a honeycomb”* (Ps 19:10).