



Session 4: Clarity & Interpretation

1. SCRIPTURE'S CLARITY

Definition

"The church has historically recognized that "the Bible is written in such a way that its teachings are able to be understood by all who will read it, seeking God's help and being willing to follow it." While affirming this generally, the church has also acknowledged that some parts of the Bible seem quite puzzling and hard to understand. The early church believed that these more obscure portions could be understood by reading them in the light of the clearer portions. The Roman Catholic Church emphasized the obscurity of Scripture for average believers and insisted that only its clergy—men who were trained to interpret the Bible—could understand it rightly. The Protestant Reformers responded with the doctrine of the clarity of Scripture, insisting that the Bible is written in such a way that ordinary believers and not just Bible scholars are able to understand it correctly."

(Gregg R. Allison, *Historical Theology*, 120)

Westminster Confession of Faith (1.7)

"All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all (2 Pet. 3:16); yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them (Ps. 119:105, 130)."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- If the doctrine of the clarity of Scripture is true, why does there seem to be so much disagreement among Christians about the teaching of the Bible? Observing the diversity of interpretations of Scripture, some conclude, "People can make the Bible say anything they want." How do you think Jesus would respond to this statement?
- What would happen to the church if most believers gave up reading the Bible for themselves and only listened to Bible teachers or read books about the Bible? If you thought that only expert scholars could understand the Bible rightly, what would happen to your personal reading of Scripture? Has this already happened to some extent in your life or in the lives of those you know?
- Do you think that there are right and wrong interpretations of most or all passages of Scripture? If you thought the Bible was generally unclear, how would your answer change? Will a conviction about the clarity of Scripture affect the care you use when studying a text of Scripture? Will it affect the way you approach Scripture when trying to gain a biblical answer to some difficult doctrinal or moral problem?
- If even seminary professors disagree about some Bible teaching, can other Christians ever hope to come to a correct decision on that teaching? (Give reasons for your answer.) Do you think ordinary people among the Jews at the time of Jesus had a hard time deciding whether to believe Jesus or the scholarly experts who disagreed with him? Did Jesus expect them to be able to decide?
- How can a pastor preach biblically based sermons each Sunday without giving the impression that only people with seminary training (like himself) are able to interpret Scripture rightly? Do you think it should ever be necessary, in a doctrinal or ethical controversy, for a Bible scholar to speak in a church and base his main arguments on special meanings of Greek or Hebrew words that the church members themselves are unable to evaluate or take issue with personally? Is there an appropriate way for a scholar to use such technical knowledge in popular writing or speaking?
- Church leaders at the time of Martin Luther said they wanted to keep the Bible in Latin to prevent the common people from reading it and then misinterpreting it. Evaluate this argument. Why do you think Martin Luther was so anxious to translate the Bible into German? Why do you think church leaders in previous centuries have persecuted and even killed men—like William Tyndale in England—who were translating the Bible into the language of the people? Why is the task of Bible translation into other languages so important a part of the work of missions?
- Does the doctrine of the clarity of Scripture mean that the New Testament can be fully understood by people who do not have access to an Old Testament?

2. SCRIPTURE'S INTERPRETATION

A. Why Study the Bible?

When we talk about interpreting Scripture, we are talking about the topic of Bible Study - going deeper than just a surface level reading of a text of Scripture into what it means. However, for many people today, this discipline of studying God's Word is not one of high priority. R.C. Sproul made the observation:

"There is a great deal of difference between reading and studying. Reading is something we can do in a leisurely way, something that can be done strictly for entertainment in a casual manner. But study suggests labour, serious and diligent work.

Here is the real problem of our negligence. We fail in our duty to study God's Word not so much because it is difficult to understand, not so much because it is dull and boring, but because it is work. Our problem is not a lack of intelligence or a lack of passion. Our problem is that we are lazy." (R.C. Sproul, *Knowing Scripture*, 20)

Sproul continues,

"Isn't it amazing that almost everyone living in the West has an opinion to offer about the Bible, and yet so few have really studied it?" (ibid, 21)

This observation is quite apt for our times. It also is not new to our times. Jesus scolded the most religious and trained men in the Jewish scriptures that "You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God." (Matthew 22:29) and Peter warned his readers that there were many foolish and ignorant people who twisted the Scriptures (2 Peter 3:16). How many controversies over various issues of life, morals, ethics, and faith today are vigorously argued and debated without much thought or serious application of the meaning of Scripture and what the Bible as a whole says about the topic?

This problem of practical apathy to God's Word plays out sometimes in another way. Listen to Sproul again:

"Countless times I have heard Christians say, 'Why do I need to study doctrine or theology when all I need to know is Jesus?' My immediate reply is, 'Who is Jesus?' As soon as we begin to answer this question, we are involved in doctrine or theology. No Christian can avoid theology... The issue for Christians is not whether we are going to be theologians but whether we are going to be good theologians." (R.C. Sproul, *Knowing Scripture*, 25)

This is true. Either you will be a bad theologian or a good one, but you cannot help but be a theologian. The essential question though is: "From where do you derive your theology?"

As we saw in previous sessions, the Bible is the only inspired, infallible, sufficient rule of faith for the Christian life. That is why it is absolutely imperative that every Christian devote themselves to the study and proper understanding of God's Word.

However, aside from guarding us against the dangers of ignorance or apathy, a diligent study of God's Word holds out to us the promise of immense blessings and joy! Here are seven quick reasons to apply yourself to the study of God's Word.

I. To Know God

As we saw from previous sessions, we can know some things about God through creation and what is called "General Revelation", but if we want to know God intimately, we must read His "Special Revelation" to us - the Bible.

In 1 Samuel, the young prophet Samuel did not recognize the voice of God:

"Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord: The word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him." (1 Samuel 3:7)

Samuel did not know God because he had not yet received His word. So it is with us. Unless we receive God's Word to us - the Bible - we will not truly know God.

Do you want to know God?

II. To Know God's Will

Many Christians go about living their lives by what they 'feel' God wants them to do. However, how would it go if my wife took the time to write to me a detailed letter of what I should do and not do in order to love her well but I totally disregarded it and went by what I felt and the things which I liked - ignoring her own expressed preferences? Yet this and much worse is what many of us do with God.

Because of our fallen state and sinfulness, we do not know the full will of God for us. In the Scriptures we discover how God wants us to relate to Him in worship and reverence (Exodus 20:2-7; Matthew 22:37) and how God wants us to relate to one another in mutual love reflecting His character (Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 22:39). We find out that one of God's primary desires for us is that we would be sanctified (1 Thess. 4:3), be thankful in all circumstances (1 Thes. 5:18), serve others humbly (Eph. 6:6) and suffer for His Name (1 Pet. 2:15).

This and much more we discover about God's will for us through His Word. Do you want to know God's will for your life or go about life aimlessly wandering for what God would have you do?

III. To Grow in Godliness

2 Timothy 3:16 showed us that all Scripture is profitable for “training in righteousness”. This means that one of the primary purposes of Scripture in the life of a believer is to make him/her more like God. As we read Scripture and behold God’s glory revealed to us in His Word, we begin to reflect that glory in our own lives as the Spirit transforms us (2 Cor. 3:18).

Do you want to grow in godliness or worldliness? There is no choice - we’re either growing in one or the other.

IV. To Defend Ourselves

We are constantly under attack from the forces of the world, the flesh and the Devil. The Christian therefore needs a mighty armour to withstand these formidable foes. Paul in Ephesians 6 describes this armour that God gives to us for our defense. Notably, it is “the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God” (Eph. 6:17) which our Lord gives us to fend off these attacks. We saw Jesus wield this sword skillfully against the attacks of the Devil in Matthew 4.

Are you skilled with your sword or are you defenseless in the battle?

V. To Be Fruitful

2 Timothy 3:17 tells us that the Scriptures equip us for every good work. David says that the one whose “delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night” - that is, he applies himself diligently to study and understand God’s word - it is this one who “is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither.” (Psa. 1:2-3) Jesus said that it is the one who hears and understands his word that produces plentiful fruit (see Matt. 13:23).

Do you want to be fruitful or barren in your life?

VI. For Your Joy

The Psalmist says, “I rejoice in your promise like one who finds great spoil.” (Psa. 119:162) Many more passages speak to the joy of God’s Word.

Do you want true, unfailing, invincible, undeterred, persevering joy in your life even in the midst of suffering?

VII. To Fuel Your Prayers

1 John 4:14-15 tells us that “This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us - whatever we ask - we know that we have what we asked of Him.” This is exactly what our Lord said to us:

"If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples... These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full." (John 15:7,8 & 11)

Do you want to experience the joy of God answering your prayers?

B. You can do it

Many find it daunting to think about reading the whole Bible in a year. Our lives are busy, time is limited, there are bills to pay and other legitimate issues of life to deal with. However, I want to give you hope not guilt. Reading the Bible through every year is quite a small commitment compared to the host of other things we tend to give our time towards.

For the average reader, it takes about fifteen minutes per day to read through the entire Bible every year.

Perhaps that surprises you, but it's true. With just 15 minutes a day, you would have read 90 hours of God's Word in the year! Imagine how much more if we set aside more than 15 minutes. Little steps can add up to a lot.

Also, consider that like any other thing, reading and interpreting your Bible takes practice. Just like working out - it's hard at first because your muscles aren't yet strong and don't have the endurance. However, after enough repetition and perseverance, you can lift more and last longer. It is the same with reading - think of it as a muscle. Perhaps today you may only be able to handle 15 minutes of intense and concentrated focus. But keep at it diligently and you will soon begin to see that muscle grow more than you'd ever imagine!

So, how do we start?

I. Make Time

You must decide that this is the highest priority for you. Make an appointment to meet with the Lord daily - reading His Word and responding in prayer to what you've read - and keep it! Show up to your daily appointment like your life depended on it - because it does!

There is no set time to when this should happen. It could be morning, noon or evening. Whatever fits your schedule best, and whenever you find that you are most alert and able to take in what you read. Many people find that if they don't do it first thing in the morning, it's easy for the rest of their day to run away on them.

II. Choose a Good Translation

To keep things simple, we will recommend 2 translations here.

- Our church uses the ESV translation for preaching and study because it is a good, faithful word-for-word translation that aims to retain the original meaning of the

text yet also remaining readable. This is a great translation if you want to follow along with sermons and go into more in-depth study.

- Another option is the CSB. This is also a great translation - but it is more thought-for-thought rather than word-for-word. This translation is more readable and written with more contemporary language. It is great for reading long narrative sections of the Bible or if you're new to the faith and struggle with reading other translations.

There are many others we could mention, but for the sake of simplicity, we'll leave it at those two. For a fuller discussion about Bible translations, you can check out [THIS ARTICLE](#). We'll also talk a little more about translations in our last session in this class.

III. Make a Plan & Stick to it

Bible Reading Plans help you stay on track by giving you which passages you should read per day. Here are three you can check out:

- [E100 Bible Reading Plan](#) - this plan is great if you're just getting started reading the Bible. It is made up of 50 Old Testament and 50 New Testament Readings which give you a good overview of the Bible's story as a whole. If doing a full year's reading plan sounds daunting, this might be a good one to start with to help you get an overview of the Bible.
- [ESV Daily Reading Plan](#) - this is the same plan that is available in the ESV Study Bible. It is a great option because you can use it as a way to read the New Testament twice, the Psalms twice and the Old Testament once in just a year.
- [ESV Chronological Reading Plan](#) - if you get confused about the timeline of things happening in the Bible, this plan arranges your readings chronologically. [THIS ARTICLE](#) explains a bit more about the different ESV plans which are available and the benefits of each.

Simply print out the plan of your choice and start reading the passages assigned per day during your daily appointments with the Lord (and feel the satisfaction of checking it off! Haha) and see how much more of the Bible you know in only one year!

Sounds simple right? It is. **Don't underestimate the power of what God can do through His Spirit in you if you apply yourself - even starting off in a small way - to studying His Word.** These same principles of basic Bible reading apply to our study of God's Word. We must make time for it, choose a good translation, and then make a plan on how to study God's Word and stick to it. That is what we will talk about next - "How to Study the Bible."

C. How to Study the Bible

The doctrine of the clarity of Scripture which we looked at in the first half of this class is the basis for our confidence that we can understand what the Bible is meant to say to us. However, this does not mean, as we saw, that everything is equally clear in the Bible.

Kevin Vanhoozer is helpful here:

“To begin with, it is important to note what the clarity of Scripture does not mean. It does not mean, first of all, that interpretation is unnecessary - the biblical meaning will be delivered up by some mystical process of hermeneutical osmosis. Nor does it mean that an autonomous individual can, by employing critical techniques alone, wrest the meaning from the text. Rather, clarity means that the Bible is sufficiently unambiguous in the main for any well-intentioned person with Christian faith to interpret each part with relative adequacy. In the context of the Reformation, the perspicuity of Scripture was the chief weapon for combating the authority of the dominant interpretive community: Rome.”

(Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, pg. 315)

Vanhoozer continues:

“The idea that the Bible is clear does not obviate the need for interpretation but, on the contrary, makes the work of interpretation even more important. The clarity of Scripture means that understanding is possible, not that it is easy. Redeeming the text does not mean reconciling all interpretive conflicts. The clarity of Scripture is neither an absolute value nor an abstract property, but a specific function relative to its particular aim: to witness to Christ. The clarity of Scripture, in other words, does not mean that we will know everything there is to know about the text, but that we will know enough to be able, and responsible, to respond to its subject matter. The clarity of Scripture is not a matter of its obviousness so much as its efficacy; the Bible is clear enough to render its communicative action effective.”

(Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 317).

So this gives us great confidence that even though we may not fully understand every minute detail of Scripture, we can understand - through the use of ordinary means - the main things the Bible is meant to communicate to us. If you apply yourself using these ordinary means - you can understand the Bible's message. Much of the method we will discuss today to approach studying the Bible will seem obvious and even simple - but that's the point! You can understand what God has said, because God is not an ineffective communicator! He said something and He meant for us to understand what He has said.

God's Word Demands Study

Probably the most compelling reason that we must study the Bible is because the Bible itself commands us to do this. This is repeatedly instructed in the Old Testament with warnings about misrepresenting God's Word, and examples such as in Nehemiah:

"They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading." (Nehemiah 8:8)

We see there that it was the meaning of the words of God's Law that was important to communicate to the people. Similarly for us today, the question is not "what does this passage mean to you" it is "what does this passage MEAN!" There is a correct meaning of the text, and it is our responsibility to understand it.

Paul most clearly communicates this to Timothy when he tells him (and us):

"Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth." (2 Timothy 2:15)

The Greek word translated "rightly handling" is the word ὀρθοτομοῦντα (orthotomounta). It combines two words that mean "straight" (ortho) and "cut" (tomeō). It means to make a straight cut. John MacArthur explains it this way:

"Because Paul is a tentmaker, he may have been using an expression that tied in with his trade. When Paul made tents, he used certain patterns. In those days tents were made from the skins of animals in a patchwork sort of design. Every piece would have to be cut and fit together properly. Paul was simply saying, "If one doesn't cut the pieces right, the whole won't fit together properly." It's the same thing with Scripture. If one doesn't interpret correctly the different parts, the whole message won't come through correctly. In Bible study and interpretation the Christian should cut it straight. He should be precise ... and accurate."¹

This is what we are to "do our best" to present ourselves as one approved by God. The text is emphatically commanding us to the diligent application of all the best of our efforts to rightly interpret the Bible. These reasons and many more are why we MUST apply ourselves to study and rightly interpret and understand God's Word.

A Danger to Avoid: "Narcegesis"

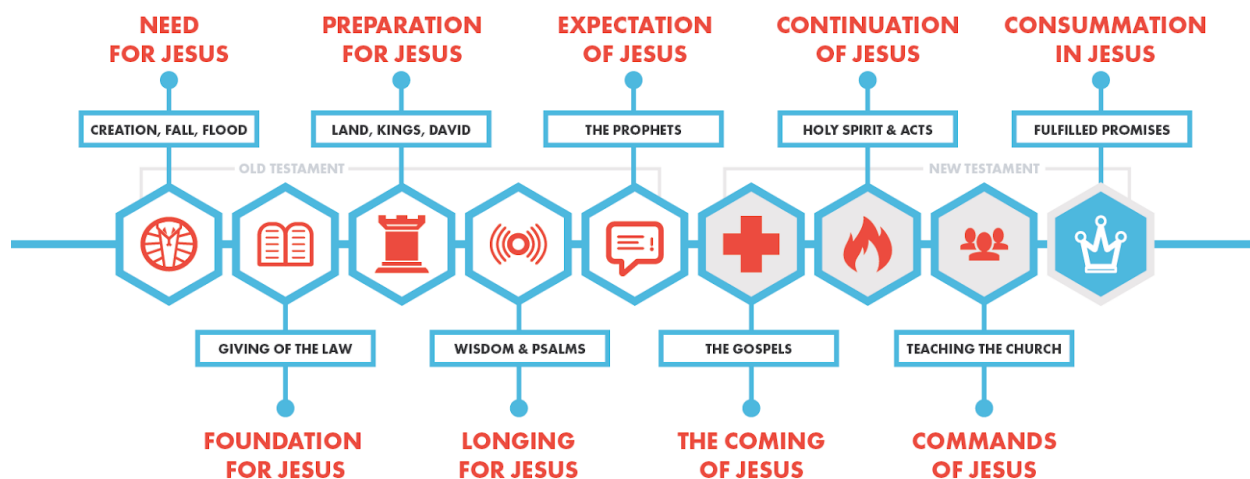
This is a made-up word by squishing the words "narcissist" (which is someone who is obsessed about themselves) and "exegesis" (which is the process of interpreting a text of scripture) together. Narcegesis happens when someone constantly reads themselves into the text of Scripture, or makes Scripture all about themselves, or reads it primarily through

¹ John F. MacArthur, *The Charismatics*, 57

their own personal lens. We don't want to be doing narcegesis because the Bible is not about you!

To be sure, the Bible is FOR you. But it is not primarily about you. The Bible is all about God - and primarily about pointing us to Jesus Christ! It is about Jesus from cover to cover!

Jesus – Cover to Cover



Before we get to “what does this passage mean to me” we must ask the primary question “what does this passage mean?” What did it mean to the original author - what was their intent - what did they want their readers to understand? Only then can we consider what it means to us today - otherwise, we’re practicing narcegesis.

A Definition of Hermeneutics

The study of how to properly interpret the Bible is called the study of “Hermeneutics.” The word comes from a Greek root which just means - interpretation. So, we may define it as follows:

“Hermeneutics is the science that teaches us the principles, laws, and methods of interpretation.”²

The topic of hermeneutics is a vast one, and there are many great books (which we will recommend later) that will go much deeper than we are able to in our time today. We would greatly encourage you to buy & read one of the recommended resources to help

² Louis Berkhof, Principles of Biblical Interpretation, 11.

you grow in your ability to “rightly handle the Word of truth.” Today, we will be focusing on introducing the basic/fundamental method for interpreting any passage of scripture.

The method we will discuss here briefly has three stages:

- I. **Observe** - What does the passage say?
- II. **Interpret** - What does the passage mean?
- III. **Apply** - How does the passage transform us?

Notice the progression of these stages. We should not jump from one to the other or rearrange the order if we desire to correctly interpret scripture. We must move from observation, to interpretation and finally then to application. It takes discipline and practice to do this consistently, but with some time, it becomes natural.

I. OBSERVE: What does the passage say?

“The quality of your interpretation will always depend on the quality of your observation.”³

Primary take-away for this section: MAKE OBSERVATIONS FROM BIG TO SMALL

The basic rule for making observations of a section of Scripture is to work from big to small. If we miss the big picture - the main point that the author meant to communicate, we’ve missed the whole thing. Focus on the big picture before you strain at the details. Start by seeking to interpret the big chunks of a text - structure/paragraphs - then move to the smaller units - syntax/sentences - then to the smallest units - semantics/words.

We observe by noticing and asking questions of the text.

Here are 3 categories of things to notice and questions, from big to small, to ask as you make observations of a text:

A. STRUCTURE (PARAGRAPHS)

A significant portion of meaning is carried by the written form that the author chose to use. This has to do with major forms such as law, narrative, poetry, wisdom, prophecy, parable, and epistle. It also includes smaller literary figures such as repetition, parallelism, and chiasm. These structural elements of the text can be intentionally used by the author to give attention to an important point or to frame the concept they are wishing to communicate. We should ask ourselves why a particular structure was used and how does it affect our reading of the text.

Questions to ask:

- What is the tone of the passage?
- What themes are repeated?

³ Hendricks, Living by the Book, 202

- What structure can I see in the text? Are there parallel thoughts/concepts? Is it grouped or arranged a certain way? Why is it arranged that way?
- Are there transitions, interjections, conjunctions that happen in the text? Does the focus shift or does the tone change?
- What is this section telling me? Is it telling me something expository or hortatory? Is it describing something or prescribing something to me? (i.e. is it telling me something about what has been done? Or telling me something to do? - is it indicative or imperative?)

B. SENTENCES (SYNTAX)

The foundation for understanding a text is that part of grammatical analysis called syntax: the study of the arrangement of words, phrases, and clauses to form sentences.

Questions to ask:

- Is there anything of note about the order of words or how the sentence is constructed?
- What do I observe about the grammar? What is the main verb? Who/what is the subject/object? Is anything modifying the verb? What are the adjectives (descriptive words)?
- What are the linking words? (conjunctions and prepositions - e.g. - and, or, but, then, therefore, so that, etc)
- How do the linking words connect the parts of the sentences (clauses)?
- Are there any OT references, quotes, or allusions in the text? Where are they from? Go read it!

Identifying the main verb or clause can help frame the overall idea of a sentence or paragraph for us and make interpreting the rest of the elements in light of that main verb or clause easier. A simple tip for finding the main verb (as it may not be as obvious in English) is to ask "what is the intended outcome or take-away of the sentence?"

Linking words help us determine how the different parts of a sentence are related to each other. Sometimes this may not be readily apparent in English, so use of a good commentary will help you in this.

C. WORDS (SEMANTICS)

Semantics is the study of word meanings. This is where dictionaries and lexicons can come in handy to help us understand what an unfamiliar word means. A word's shade of meaning in a given text may depart from the lexicon's "range of senses," but the immediate context must make that meaning clear.

Questions to ask:

- What words stand out to me?

- Are any words repeated - either exactly or in synonyms?
- Are there any words I don't understand?
- What are the possible range of meanings for this word?

At this point you are simply making observations. Note down your observations. Note down things that are confusing, surprising, interesting, etc. Don't try to interpret them as yet. Remember - the key to good interpretation is good observation. So, you want to make as many good observations as you can first before you start making interpretations.

Think of it as a crime scene. In this phase you're gathering evidence. You don't yet know the solution to the puzzle. You're dusting for fingerprints, interrogating the witnesses, and taking pictures of the scene.

II. INTERPRET: What does the passage mean?

Primary take-away for this section: CONTEXT IS KING

If we were to continue our detective analogy, in this phase, you're investigating and examining the evidence you collected. You're trying to put it together and figure out the big story that it makes sense within.

A common danger people often do with the Bible is that they isolate a word or sentence or paragraph, and take it to mean what they think it means. Disregarding the context is one of the greatest problems in Bible interpretation. By disregarding the "total surroundings" of a Bible verse, we may completely misunderstand the verse. We need to take into consideration the sentences and paragraphs that precede and follow the verse and also to take into consideration the cultural setting in which the passage and even the entire book is written. Then consider how that fits into the Bible's message as a whole.

"Careful handling of the Bible will enable us to 'hear' it a little better. It is all too easy to read the traditional interpretations we have received from others into the text of Scripture. Then we may unwittingly transfer the authority of Scripture to our traditional interpretations and invest them with a false, even idolatrous, degree of certainty. Because traditions are reshaped as they are passed on, after a while we may drift far from God's Word while still insisting all our theological opinions are 'biblical' and therefore true." [D.A. Carson, Exegetical Fallacies, 17]

It would be strange for someone to do with another book what some do with the Bible. Think of how weird it would be for me to try to read Shakespeare with my modern cultural understanding, or try to bake a cake but read the instructions out of order. It would clearly violate what the author's intention would have been and instead impose my own meaning on the text. Let us respect authors and keep the golden rule of reading, "do unto authors as you would have them do unto you." [John Piper, Think, 45]

For interpretation, we simply take the observations we made from before and start to investigate them further.

A. STRUCTURE (PARAGRAPHS)

When investigating the structure, we look at a few important things which give us clues to interpret our previous observations:

- Where do these paragraphs occur in the book/letter?
- What is its genre?
- What is the historical time period and cultural environment in which it was written?
- Who was the original author and audience? Who wrote it and to whom was it written?

When we look at where a passage occurs in the overall structure of a book, and even in the overall narrative of the Bible as a whole, it helps put things in perspective for us. For example, the “Love Chapter” of 1 Corinthians 13 is often read at many weddings as a passage about marital love. However, in the context of the letter of 1 Corinthians, it happens in the middle of a discussion Paul is having regarding the proper use of spiritual gifts. It is clear from its context that the purpose of this passage is to encourage the Corinthian believers to pursue love more than they are pursuing extraordinary spiritual gifts!

When we look at the genre we realize how we are to read a passage. For example, we all know that we read a recipe and a poem very differently. It would be strange for me to read a poem that uses metaphorical language in a strictly literalistic way. Likewise, it would be strange for me to read a recipe as if it were speaking of only ‘metaphorically’ using 3 teaspoons of salt! The Bible contains many different genres of books - and we must know the genre of the passage we’re currently reading to know how to read it properly.

When we look at the historical and cultural clues, and take into consideration the original author and audience, it helps us interpret the text on its own terms. We want to know what it meant to the original audience before we can know what it means to us today. For example, the story of the woman in Bethany who pours ointment on Jesus in Mark 14:4-5 says that it could be sold for more than three hundred denarii. When we look at the historical context, we find out that a denarius was a day’s wage. So this ointment had a value equal to 300 days wage - almost a full year’s salary! This helps us appreciate the meaning of the text.

There are many historical and cultural details of ancient times in the Bible which we do not readily know or understand. This is where a Study Bible, Commentary or Bible Dictionary will help you immensely. We can’t all be scholars of everything, but thankfully the Lord has blessed His church with many people who have studied and written on these topics for a

very long time now. We can glean from many hundreds of years of wisdom to help us investigate a text.

We will recommend a few of these types of resources to help you grow in this at the end of this class.

At this point you also look at some of the observations you made about the structure and start to consider how these affect your interpretation:

- **What is the tone of the passage?** - is this a rebuke or encouragement? Is the author joyful, sad, mourning, frustrated, concerned, serious, sarcastic, etc. The Bible is full of the full range of human emotions - and as we know, the tone in which you say something can drastically change its intended meaning!
- **What themes are repeated?** - this may be a marker to us that this is an important concept in this section of Scripture. So we direct our focus primarily to understand that concept.
- **What structure can I see in the text? Are there parallel thoughts/concepts? Is it grouped or arranged a certain way? Why is it arranged that way?** - this helps us to see if the author is trying to draw your attention to something specific. Or perhaps the author is arranging it in a way that is memorable.
- **Are there transitions, interjections, conjunctions that happen in the text? Does the focus shift or does the tone change?** - this helps us see when there is a change within the text that affects how we read that portion.
- **What is this section telling me? Is it telling me something expository or hortatory? Is it describing something or prescribing something to me?** - this is VERY important. Because if we read indicatives like they are imperatives, we may end up thinking we have to do something when really the passage is telling us what's already been done! Mixing up description with prescription turns theology upside down. For example, if you didn't realize that the majority of the narrative sections of the Bible are descriptive, you might think that the Bible teaches polygamy or incest from the stories in the Old Testament. But that is not the point - the Bible is simply describing what happened and if we read on in the narratives, we see that it didn't work out well for them - so overall, it is meant to teach that those things don't work out well! Another example is the book of Acts - it describes how the church started - it is about the formation or foundation of the Christian church. However, if we read it prescriptively, we might think that we have to repeat everything which happens in Acts today - but that is not how a foundation works. You don't keep laying a foundation.

B. SENTENCES (SYNTAX)

Here we start to investigate some of the observations we made before about the sentences.

- **What are the verse(s) immediately before and after a passage?** - does this affect the way you read the sentence? What information does it give you to help make sense of that sentence?
- **Is there anything of note about the order of words or how the sentence is constructed?** - perhaps the order of a list of things might indicate the order of importance or priority. Perhaps it is constructed oddly, is there a reason why? This might be a good cue to consult a Study Bible or Commentary at this point. Good observations make you an efficient researcher by giving you cues to where it might be useful to make use of other resources.
- **What do I observe about the grammar? What is the main verb? Who/what is the subject/object? Is anything modifying the verb? What are the adjectives (descriptive words)?** - Identifying the main verb or clause can help frame the overall idea of a sentence or paragraph for us and make interpreting the rest of the elements in light of that main verb or clause easier. A simple tip for finding the main verb (as it may not be as obvious in English) is to ask "what is the intended outcome or take-away of the sentence?"
- **What are the linking words? How do the linking words connect the parts of the sentences (clauses)?** - Linking words help us determine how the different parts of a sentence are related to each other. Sometimes this may not be readily apparent in English, so use of a good commentary will help you in this. Certain linking words are important cues for us - we should make a habit of paying special attention to them (e.g. Therefore, so that, because, for, but, and, etc).

C. WORDS (SEMANTICS)

Here we start to get down to investigating the details. By this point though, we should have a good overall understanding of what is the big picture of the passage we're studying. This helps us in figuring out what of these smaller details makes sense in the big picture. This is why it is important to go from big to small.

- **What words stand out to me?**
- **Are any words repeated - either exactly or in synonyms?**

This may help you pinpoint something important that the author is stressing.

- **Are there any words I don't understand?**
- **What are the possible range of meanings for this word?**

Consult a Bible Dictionary to find out what are the possible meanings of the word. What meaning makes the most sense in the context of this passage? Why does that meaning make most sense over other choices?

The task of determining the meaning of a word in the Bible sometimes carries the added difficulty that some may not have knowledge of the original languages (Hebrew & Greek) to

determine for themselves what the original words mean. However, with the help of a good commentary - this too can be navigated!

For the majority of people, word studies can sometimes be helpful, but the best tool is context. If one wants to do word studies, they should read from qualified scholars of the original languages who would be more familiar with the idioms and workings of those languages to give proper insight.

An easy way to illustrate the danger of doing word studies without a proper understanding of the original language is the example of someone who doesn't speak English trying to do a word study in English. Imagine for a moment that a person from a far-off tribe that has no knowledge of English is trying to make sense of the simple sentence, "The butterfly was lead here." There are multiple ways they could misinterpret this sentence by uninformed word-studies. They could look up the word "lead" and see that it is a very heavy metal - and think the butterfly turns into lead at this point! Or, they could look at the word "butterfly" and see that it is made up of two words. So, to get to the 'real deeper meaning' they break it apart and say - well, the word butterfly is made up of two words, "butter" and "fly" - so this sentence means that when the butter becomes airborne in this location it turns to a very heavy metal! We see how ridiculous this is - but how it is possible for someone with no understanding of the original language. The same is true of ancient Hebrew and Greek.

Watch out for those who would try to hang too much on just one word alone without proper warrant from its context and the entire testimony of scripture - remember the first rule: context is king!

III. APPLY: How does the passage transform us?

Primary take-away for this section: DON'T BE UNMOVED BY GOD'S WORD.

If we were to stretch the detective analogy further, this stage would be taking all the evidence and results of your investigation to make a conviction of the criminal. (OK, I admit, this analogy is not perfect... haha)

After making observations by saturating ourselves with the material and noting the setting, then seeking to interpret by moving from big to small (structure, syntax, semantics), we now move to application. There are 2 final steps for us to apply our study of scripture to our own lives.

A. SUMMARIZE

This is a review of all that a passage has said and gathers them up into a meaningful whole. Having dealt with various details in the biblical text, good bible study goes on to ask how these findings fit together, and how they impact us.

Questions to ask:

- What main point(s) has the text made?

- What is the overall thrust—the persuasive logic—in this passage?
- What is the overall tone of the passage? Rebuke? Encouragement?
- Is this passage descriptive or prescriptive? Is it describing something or prescribing something?
- How would I explain this passage to a non-Christian? (missional aspect)

It is a helpful practice then, when studying a Biblical passage to write your own summary in your own words of what the main points are. This will help you to organize the thoughts and concepts in your own mind and also provide a nice summary outline for what you have read. Keep this as a reminder of what God has shown to you through your study.

B. HOW DOES IT TRANSFORM US?

James warns us not to just stop at observation and interpretation of the Word: “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.” (James 1:22) If you stop short of applying God’s Word to your life and heart, you are deceiving yourself! There is a real danger here. It is the danger of taking something that was supposed to be transforming and a blessing in your life, and actually turning it into your own self-deception and condemnation. It is a cycle which, if left unchecked, can lead you to real spiritual blindness.

There are 3 major ways you can consider how a Bible passage transforms you:

1. HEAD: Allowing God’s Word to shape my mind

- What does this passage teach me about God’s nature?
- What does this passage teach me about myself in relation to God?
- What does this passage teach me to believe about doctrine or the Christian life?

2. HEART: Allowing God’s Word to shape my affections

- What does this passage tell me to feel?
- What does this passage tell me to love?
- What does this passage tell me to hate?

3. HANDS: Allowing God’s Word to shape my actions

- Do I have sin that needs to be confessed in light of this passage?
- Is there an explicit command that I need to follow in this passage?
- Is there an example for me to follow in this passage?
- How can I advance God’s Kingdom based on this passage?

RECOMMENDED BIBLE STUDY TOOLS

1. Books on How to Read the Bible

- [A Visual Theology Guide to the Bible](#) by Tim Challies
- [The Bible Study Handbook](#) by Lindsay Olesberg
- [Knowing Scripture](#) by R.C. Sproul
- [Inductive Bible Study](#) by Andreas J. Kostenberger

2. Study Bibles (e.g. ESV Study Bible, Reformation Study Bible)

3. Commentaries

- Single-volume commentaries (e.g. The Believer's Bible Commentary)
- Commentary sets (e.g. The Pillar New Testament Commentary, The Anchor Bible Commentary, The New International Commentary)
- Individual series (see Challies.com or Ligonier's lists of top commentaries)

4. Concordances, Bible dictionaries, Atlases, Devotionals, OT & NT Introductions

5. Bible Software

- LOGOS Bible Software
- BibleWorks
- Accordance Bible Software

6. Online Resource

- BibleStudyTools.com
- DesiringGod.org – Look at the Book series resource
- Ligonier.org
- Bible.org
- BibleHub.com
- The Bible Project
- GotQuestions.org