

# 3 SIMPLE PRINCIPLES FOR INTERPRETATION

Here are three big picture ideas for approaching interpreting the Bible. If we keep these 3 big concepts in mind, it will help us tremendously with rightly dividing the Word (2 Tim. 2:15). They are simply:

1. Observation
2. Interpretation
3. Application

The correct flow of Bible study should be: **Observation -> Interpretation -> Application**

When many people approach the Bible, they jump from observation to application, skipping the essential step of interpretation. Or they may try to interpret before making careful observations of the text. Or perhaps they observe and interpret correctly but forget to apply the text and wind up with only head knowledge and no meaningful application to their own lives.

In observing what the Bible says, you discover, you look; in interpretation, you mull, you chew. Observation means depicting what is there, and interpretation is deciding what it means. The one is to explore, the other is to explain. Application considers what was learnt from observation and interpretation to then consider how to apply the truth taken out of Scripture to our own lives today. Application digests what you looked at and chewed over in the previous two steps.

We will be thinking of these 3 concepts in terms of questions we can ask as we study the Biblical text. These questions are: who, when, where, how, what and why.

## 1. OBSERVATION - WHAT IS THE CONTEXT?

### Primary take-away for this section: CONTEXT IS KING

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 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.

The context in which a given Scripture passage is written influences how that passage is to be understood. Context includes several things:

- the verse(s) immediately before and after a passage
- the paragraph and book in which the verses occur
- the historical time period and cultural environment in which it was written
- the message of the entire Bible

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]

Here are 2 categories of questions you can ask that will help you make good observations:

## A. SATURATE

The principle here is quite simple. Read the whole letter through in one sitting or in multiple sittings close together. Read the passage and its context several times, perhaps even in various translations, to get yourself familiar with it.

Questions to ask yourself:

- How familiar am I with this passage and the whole book it is in?
- Have I read the whole letter through in one sitting or close together in multiple sittings?
- How familiar am I with the Bible's message as a whole?

The goal here is just simply to saturate yourself with the content. This is a process that takes a lifetime of Bible reading - so don't think you need to do it all at once. However, it should be the ongoing goal of your daily Bible reading and study to become more and more saturated with God's Word. For the person just getting started reading the Bible, this is where having older, more mature believers around you will help as they have spent more time saturating themselves in the Bible and may be able to point out connections or parallels you might miss as a novice.

## B. SETTING

Every text has a birthplace, some better known than others, that tells us important things about it. The matters of authorship, date of the composition, and original readers frame the historical context of a writing. When persons, places, and events are named in a passage, they point to a background that provides essential information for the interpreter. The Bible is written in a time and land which is quite foreign to much of us, so understanding the setting can help give us some valuable insight into understanding the text rightly.

Questions to ask:

- Who wrote this?
- Who was it written to?
- When and where was it written?

The goal here is to understand the setting in which the letter was composed. Knowing who wrote the text helps us understand that author's typical style or background from which they are writing. For example, Paul was well educated in Greek learning and was a Pharisee, an expert in the Jewish law, so his letters reflect his background. Peter was a Jewish fisherman, and what we learn of him from the Gospels and Acts informs us of his style of writing. Knowing who it was written to helps us understand the people who would be receiving the letter - were they Jews or Gentiles? Were the recipients one individual, a particular church or a group of churches in a letter meant to be circulated? When and where it was written helps us understand the historical context that the text was written in.

To answer all these questions, in addition to reading the Bible carefully, sometimes we may have to consult good Bible commentaries written by biblical scholars who can help us fill in the gaps of information about the context. We will later go through some suggestions for commentaries you can use to help you understand the contexts of biblical books.

## 2. INTERPRETATION - WHAT IS THE MEANING?

**When we believe what we think the Bible is saying, and not what it is actually saying—it is not the Bible we are believing, but rather ourselves.**

If we approach the Bible with preconceived notions which we are only looking for proof-texts to support, we are not submitting ourselves to the renewing of our minds through the Word but rather just looking for another way to approve our own will. New Testament scholar D.A. Carson, says:

"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 is therefore vitally important that we learn the principles of good Bible interpretation if we are to avoid simply reinforcing our errors we may have inherited from traditions and be continually reformed and renewed in our minds through God's Word. Sometimes we can assume we already know what the text means and end up simply imposing our own thoughts on the text. So it is important to take a step back, distance ourselves from our preconceived interpretations and critically analyze them again.

### **Primary take-away for this section: MOVE FROM BIG TO SMALL**

The basic rule for interpretation is to work from big to small. If we miss the big picture - the main point that the author meant to communicate, we have 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 - then move to the smaller units - syntax/sentences - then to the smallest units - semantics/words.

Here are 3 categories of questions, from big to small, to ask after you have made observations and are moving on to interpreting 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 genre?
- What words and themes are repeated?
- 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?
- What is this section telling me? Is it telling me something expository or hortatory? (i.e. is it telling me something about what has been done? Or telling me something to do? - is it indicative or imperative?)

## B. SYNTAX (SENTENCES)

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:

- What does the grammar tell me?
- What is the main verb? Who is the subject? Is anything modifying the verb?
- 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)?

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. Remember to always ask, "What is the therefore, there for?" Sometimes figuring out linking words may not be readily apparent in English, so use of a good commentary will also help you in this.

## C. SEMANTICS (WORDS)

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 each text may depart from the lexicon's "range of senses," but the immediate context must make that meaning clear.

Questions to ask:

- What are the possible range of meanings for this 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 or Study Bible - this too can be navigated!

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

## 3. APPLICATION - HOW DOES IT APPLY TO ME?

**After understanding what the passage meant to the original author and recipients, what does it mean for us today - how does God's Word apply to our heart & life?**

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

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 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. SIGNIFICANCE**

Good bible study asks how the various particulars of the biblical text are understood as a unified message. The axiom "Scripture is its own best interpreter" reflects the fact that the Bible ultimately has One Author - the Holy Spirit - and thus, its message as a whole is entirely consistent. Whether a theology of Paul, the Psalms, or the Gospels, a similar procedure is used: Scripture interpreting Scripture in order to find a coherent message. God does not contradict Himself. After you figure out what does this scripture mean in its context in the paragraph, figure out what it means in that book, then look at what it means in light of all of scripture.

Questions to ask:

- What does this passage teach about ourselves, our relationships with others, and God?
- What does this passage tell me to believe?
- What does this passage tell me to do?
- Based on what it meant in its original context, what principle or truth can we apply to ourselves today?
- What theological concept(s) is taught in this passage? (e.g. justification, sanctification, atonement)

This step helps us to continually be adding to our overall understanding of the Bible's message from beginning to end. As you work your way through studying various books of the Bible, you'll be amazed how, over time, you end up building a robust systematic theology and how well you are prepared to give an answer for the hope in you (1 Peter 3:15-16).

## FURTHER RESOURCES

It is important to go to solid and reputable sources. There are many BAD SOURCES of theology out there. Especially on the internet! Online sources are often hard to verify, can be written by anyone with an internet connection and don't have the same publishing rigor as a printed resource. This is why, generally, it is better to prefer printed/published sources from reputable publishers (e.g. Crossway, The Good Book Company, IVP, P&R, B&H, etc) – because they have a reputation to maintain and knowledgeable editors to check the work for quality.

Here are a few resources you can check out to grow in your understanding of Scripture.

Training in handling God's Word:

- [\*\*The Bible Study Handbook\*\*](#) – a good, simple and comprehensive guide to inductive Bible study. Great for personal or group study.
- [\*\*Knowing Scripture\*\*](#) – a great introduction to the doctrine of scripture and tools to read and understand the Bible properly
- [\*\*Inductive Bible Study\*\*](#) – a thorough guide of how to do inductive bible study

Devotional Bible Commentaries:

- [\*\*God's Word for You Series\*\*](#) - expository guides by trusted Bible teachers that walks you through books of the Bible verse-by-verse in an accessible and applied way.
- [\*\*Christ-Centered Exposition Series\*\*](#) - a devotional-style commentary book series providing pastors with a practical explanation of God's written word.
- [\*\*The Bible Speaks Today Series\*\*](#) - each contributor is both a notable scholar and a pastor, ensuring the commentary includes clarity of communication with careful exegesis, theological literacy and wise application, all the while remaining eminently devotional.

Bible Reference Books:

- [\*\*New Bible Commentary\*\*](#) - readable and accessible volume offers sixty-six solid, concise, evangelical commentaries—one on each book of the Bible. Also provided are introductory material on date, authorship, purpose, key themes and a to-the-point outline of each book.
- [\*\*New Bible Dictionary\*\*](#) - a reference work ideally suited for people of all ages and backgrounds. This magnificent and comprehensive Bible dictionary has set the standard for evangelical Bible dictionaries for five decades. Now in its third edition, it is the clear leader in its field.
- [\*\*The Baker Illustrated Bible Background Commentary\*\*](#) - provides fascinating cultural and historical insights into God's Word. Richly illustrated with full-color photos throughout, this one-volume background commentary includes articles by leading Old and New Testament scholars on various subjects.
- [\*\*Believer's Bible Commentary\*\*](#) - helps the average reader develop basic knowledge of the Bible and explores the deeper meaning of every biblical book and tackles controversial issues from a theologically conservative standpoint while also presenting alternative views.
- [\*\*Hard Sayings of the Bible\*\*](#) - explanations of over 500 of the most troubling verses to test the minds and hearts of Bible readers and find succinct solutions to a wide variety of Bible difficulties, ranging from discrepancies about numbers to questions about God's justice..
- [\*\*New International Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties\*\*](#) – gives answers to some of the most troublesome questions about the Bible, making scholarly insights available to everyone.