

How to Read the Bible

LESSON ONE

for All Its Worth

The Need to Interpret

Some Introductory Comments

In his second recorded letter to the Corinthians, Paul says,

2 Corinthians 4:1-2 - "Therefore seeing we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we faint not; But have renounced the hidden things of dishonesty, not walking in craftiness, nor handling the word of God deceitfully; but by manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God." (KJV 1900)

Christians have a moral obligation to properly handle the Word of God: to understand it, apply it, and then share it with others (Ezra 7:10). The goal of our lesson is to learn some of the skills necessary to study scripture and accurately discern its meaning.

The authors of, How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth make a compelling statement in this chapter, "[c]orrect interpretation, therefore, brings relief to the mind as well as a prick or prod to the heart." (p22).

When we are diligently applying ourselves to the Word, handling it honestly, and humbly depending upon the Lord, His Spirit will help us to understand its truths. We will be able to have a clear conscience before God and His Spirit will empower the Word in our hearts and lives.

Definitions

Exegesis – to carefully study the Bible to determine its intended meaning to the original audience

Hermeneutics – taking the intended message for the original audience and translating it to today's audience (you)

Approaching the Text

Everyone is an **interpreter!** We bring many things with us to the text. Our backgrounds, knowledge, and abilities can all aid us in interpreting scriptures. However, we need to make sure we don't bring a new **meaning** with us.

God's Word is for us. However, it was first God's Word to the original audience.

- We may get **specific** answers if we have the same **situation**.
- We may get specific **principles** to apply if we have a **different** situation.

Understanding the Text (Exegesis)

The Bible is unique in many ways. Our last lesson discussed several of its special characteristics. One however, that can often be forgotten is that it is a collection of many different types of writing. Name a few.

The list could include: historical narratives, prophecies, wisdom sayings, songs, letters, apocalyptic literature, genealogies, laws, riddles, drama, biographies, and sermons.

It is important to understand what you are reading, to help you appropriately interpret each type of literature. That is the purpose of this series. There are however, general principles that are relevant to Bible study, regardless of the type of literature we are reading.

How to Read the Bible for All its Worth

Lesson One – The Need to Interpret

Three Keys to Understanding the Bible:

1. Carefully **reading** the text
2. Asking the right **questions** (and knowing where to find the **answers**)
3. **Seeking** until the Lord opens the meaning up to you (**pray** for understanding)
4. Keep **repeating** steps 1, 2, and 3.

What Questions Should I Ask?

1. What is the **Historical** Context of the Passage (and of the Whole Book)?

PIP¹ 1.1 – Why did Jesus tell the disciples to look for a man carrying a pitcher of water as a sign in Mark 14:13?

Mark 14:13 - "And He sent two of His disciples and said to them, "Go into the city, and a man will meet you carrying a pitcher of water; follow him;" (NASB95)

It was customary for a woman to be carrying water; a man carrying a pitcher of water would be out of place, even in such a large city.

2. What is the **Literary** Context of the Passage?

PIP 1.2 – Does 1 Corinthians 6:12, "All things are lawful for me ..." teach that it is okay for Christians to be unfaithful to their spouse?

1 Corinthians 6:12 - "All things are lawful for me," but not all things are helpful. "All things are lawful for me," but I will not be dominated by anything." (ESV)

No, it is just the opposite. It teaches that we shouldn't give into the flesh.

3. What are the **Meanings** of the Words?

PIP 1.3 – What does the word, "peculiar" mean in Titus 2:14 in the King James Version?

Titus 2:14 - "Who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works." (KJV 1900)

It means, "owned" or "called out", a people possessed by God.

¹ **PIP** – Putting into Practice – We will use this acronym throughout the lessons to provide practical examples to help use the skills we are developing.

How to Read the Bible for All its Worth

Lesson One – The Need to Interpret

4. Are there other **Passages** in the Bible that Help Us to Understand the Passage I am Studying?

PIP 1.4 – How can you harmonize Luke 14:26, which tells us we must hate our parents, spouses, children and even ourselves if we are to be Christ’s disciple and Ephesians 6:2, which tells us to honor our parents?

Luke 14:26 - ““If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple.” (NASB95)

Ephesians 6:2 - “Honor your father and mother (which is the first commandment with a promise),” (NASB95)

Hate, in the context of Luke 14:26, means to love less. If you look at the context, you will see Jesus’ parable about those who were too consumed with everything else to serve Him. We must love Him above all.

There is a lot that goes into serious Bible study. When should we employ these questions and tools? Should they be used all the time, or just when we run into a passage that is difficult to understand?

We need to train our minds to ask these questions consistently. Sometimes there is more to a passage than meets the eye and we will miss it if we don’t look to read the text carefully and ask the right questions.

Where do I Find the Answers to these Questions?

There are lots of great resources that can be useful in our search for the truth. We will talk about a few of them here. What resource do you suppose is the most important?

A solid translation of the Bible into your native language is the most important resource you can own.

Remember that every Bible is the result of a translation process involving translation and interpretation. The word choices and phrasing of your Bible translation will affect your understanding of the text. We will be talking more about this process in our next lesson.

Below are some suggested resources that can be useful in your studies.

Questions	Answers
What is the Historical Context?	Bible Atlas, History Books, Study Bibles, Bible Dictionaries, some good commentaries
What is the Literary Context?	Reading the surrounding chapter(s) and the entire book. Outlines from Study Bibles can also help.
What do the Words Mean?	A contemporary version of the Bible in modern English, Bible Dictionaries, and learning the original languages.
What other Passages Might Help?	Topical resources like the <u>Treasury of Scripture Knowledge</u> and <u>Nave’s Topical Reference</u>

How to Read the Bible for All its Worth

Lesson One – The Need to Interpret

We are only as good as our tools: the most important is an accurate, understandable **Bible translation**.

Of all the tools we have listed, which one should we typically consult last? Why?

Commentaries are a great tool, but they should typically be the last thing that we use. A commentary provides someone else's interpretation of the text. If we aren't careful, we will let them do the heavy lifting and not really apply ourselves to think deeply about God's Word and seek to understand it ourselves. Without learning to think deeply with the help of God's Spirit, it is easy to be lead astray.

For more information about these resources, I suggest you look at the Every Member Able to Admonish (EMATA) study conducted by The Anchor Missionary Baptist Church. There are specific lessons on Contextual Analysis (Literary Context), Historical-Cultural Analysis, Lexical Analysis (what the words mean), and Theological Analysis (looking at other passages to harmonize Scripture). These lessons are available at: www.anchoredresources.org

Applying the text to our lives (Hermeneutics)

To apply the Bible to our lives today, we must understand how it applied to the **original** audience.

Find the underlying principle in passages that don't have a clear application to today.

PIP 1.5 – How does Proverbs 22:28 apply to us today? How could it be misused if we didn't seek to understand what it meant to the original audience?

Proverbs 22:28 - "Remove not the ancient landmark, which thy fathers have set." (KJV 1900)

Landmarks were used to set boundaries on their fields. If someone moved a landmark, they would be stealing property from their neighbors. Some have used this passage to say that we should not change traditions. However, it was a warning against trying to take advantage of your neighbor by moving the boundary marker on your field so that you could take some of their property. The bottom line: don't take advantage of others.

Again, this process is important when we approach **EVERY** text, not just the more difficult ones.

Some Additional Assignments:

To give you some more practice applying these principles, here are some additional questions.

1. Some churches have refused to pay pastors because of their interpretation of Acts 20:33-34, 2 Thessalonians 3:8-9 and 1 Timothy 3:3. Is this interpretation consistent with the rest of God's revelation on this subject? If not, what do these passages mean? **1 Timothy 3:3 means to be free from the love of money. Paying or not paying the pastor does not affect his spiritual qualifications. In Acts and 2 Thessalonians, Paul took on this responsibility because he was trying to win them to Christ; he was acting as an evangelist/church planter more than a pastor. He also had to deal with unique cultural situations. He is the one who teaches and encourages churches to pay pastors (1 Cor. 9:5-14, Gal. 6:6, 1 Tim. 5:17-18) and commended churches for supporting him (Phil. 4:14).**

How to Read the Bible for All its Worth

Lesson One – The Need to Interpret

2. Steve is a seasonal worker. In the summer, he has a very successful landscaping business. In the winter... well, that's a different story. Once he gets past September, he is usually in pretty bad shape financially. Typically, his pattern is feast or famine. You've tried to talk to him about this several times, but he is adamant, based on Matthew 6:25-34, that the Bible teaches us to "take no thought" for material things beyond today. He says, "to think about whether I will have money next month, or even tomorrow is a sin; doesn't Matthew 6:34 say, 'take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself.'" While it is important to bring up other relevant Scriptures, you need to help him understand what this passage really means. **(take no thought = no inordinate focus; Prov. 6:6-11, Luke 14:28-30)**

3. Nancy and Nellie are church members and good friends, but are as different as black and white. Sometimes, despite their friendship, they get caught up in disagreements and come to you to try and settle the score. Today's argument is about debt. Nancy says, "I believe it is a sin to borrow money and Nellie disagrees. Doesn't the Bible say, 'Neither a borrower nor a lender be?'. She goes on to say that money which is the root of ALL evil (1 Timothy 6:10)" Nellie retorts, "I don't agree. God is in control of everything and if He didn't want me to borrow, then He would provide me the money I need. The same is true when I borrow money; if He wants me to repay it He will give me the money I need to do so. I have just learned to trust God on these money issues. It doesn't matter what the banks and creditors think of me, only what God thinks." What will you say? Who is right? **(Nancy's verse is from Shakespeare; Psalm 37:21, Eccl. 5:4-5, Matt. 5:33-37)**

4. "I don't like the new pastor", Emmie said. She went on to say, "He has called my house twice this week to check on me and was asking personal questions about my marriage and family. The last pastor was much easier to deal with. All he did was preach on Sunday. Isn't that what the Bible teaches a pastor is supposed to do? Just look at 1 Peter 5:2; it says they are to feed the flock. It doesn't say anything about getting involved in my life." How will you respond to Emmie? **Feed means to shepherd; it isn't limited to preaching and teaching.**

5. "You can't dress like that!", Paul exclaimed. "What do you mean?", Brett responded, "my clothes are clean and modest." Paul explained, "Your clothes are trendy and you are wearing one of those new designer ties and fancy shoes. Christians aren't supposed to dress like that." "Where do you get that from?", Brett asked. "Haven't you read 1 Peter 2:9?", Paul responded, "We are supposed to be a peculiar people. If you dress that, you won't stand out as a Christian." What is wrong with Paul's understanding of 1 Peter 2:9? **Peculiar means a people of God's own possession.**

6. "It's no use; I give up", Betty cried. "What's wrong?", Steve asked. "Well, I've been praying every day and studying and trying to live for God but I'm still not perfect", Betty explained. Steve responded, "I've been saved for 30 years and trying to live for the Lord and I'm still not perfect."

How to Read the Bible for All its Worth

Lesson One – The Need to Interpret

“Well, you must not be studying the Word hard enough”, Betty replied, “2 Timothy 3:16-17 tells us that the Word is able to make us perfect for every good work. I guess I just need to study harder.” What is wrong with Betty’s understanding of 2 Timothy 3:16-17? **Perfect means complete.**

7. You are discussing with a person the need for a personal relationship with Jesus Christ as the only means of salvation. He claims that living a moral life is what God expects of us, and shows you Micah 6:8 to validate his point. Will you argue that this verse is consistent with your point of view, and if so, how will you do it? If you take the point of view that salvation was by works in the Old Testament (as this verse seems to suggest), how will you reconcile this with Paul’s statement in Galatians 2:16 that “by works of the law shall no flesh be justified” **This verse shows us what God requires, but it also shows us that we cannot meet this standard. That is the purpose of the law. It begs the question, how can we then be saved. Christ is the answer.**