

Reading the Bible

Advance in Faith Unit 107



Lesson 2 – Interpreting Scripture Part 1

To interpret something is to make sense of it.

“The aim of good interpretation is simple: to get to the plain meaning of the text. And the most common ingredient one brings to this task is enlightened common sense. The test of good interpretation is that it makes good sense of the text.”¹

“The antidote for *bad* interpretation is not *no* interpretation but *good* interpretation based on common sense guidelines.”²

1/ What is inspiration?

Remember the diagram from Week 1.

As a church Riverview’s position is that God’s inspiration of the Bible means;

- God inspired all things that in any way affected the production of the writings that make up the Bible in order to say what He desired to say in language. This means not only the words but the way the words are put together, the stories that are used, and the different books that make up the canon of scripture are inspired.
- Most of scripture represents human words with the Holy Spirit over-seeing the process so that all of the messages and information God wanted in scripture were written in by the authors.
- Inspiration does not block the human writer’s culture, personal point of view, particular circumstances in which he is writing or the goal the writer has for what he is writing.

Tom Wright makes the point that scripture is one of the places where heaven and earth overlap and interlock.

¹ G. D. Fee and D. Stuart, *How to read the Bible for all it’s Worth* (Zondervan, 2003, Grand Rapids) p18

² *Ibid*, p21

“In particular, it enables us to say that the writers, compilers, editors and even collectors of scripture were people who, with different personalities, styles, methods and intentions, were none the less caught up in the strange purposes of the covenant God, purposes which included the communication, by writing of His word.”³

This leads us to the first and most important rule for Biblical interpretation;

We first need to know what it said to its original hearers and why. Put another way –

Scripture is written *for us* but not *to us*!

Remember the computers!

2/ A Foundational Model for Bible Study

Scripture

Select a passage of scripture on which to meditate. Read it through several times, if possible using a different translation each time. Read both silently and out loud. Remember, particularly with the New Testament letters, they were written to be read out loud to a group of Christians.

Observation

This is the area where you begin to ask and answer important questions to be sure you gain a good understanding of the text.

a/ What are the main ideas found in the passage?

Think about or even list the main thoughts that come through with the passage you've just read.

b/ What is the context of this passage?

What is the bigger picture in which the passage finds itself? If this is part of a chapter, what is the chapter topic? Is this chapter a part

³ T. Wright, *Simply Christian* (SPCK, 2006, London) p155

of a group of chapters that has a particular theme? What is the theme of the book in which the passage is found?

c/ Who wrote this, when and to whom?

d/ Why was the passage (or letter) written?

e/ What type of writing is this?

Application

What is it that I can learn from this passage of scripture? Is the passage *prescriptive* or *descriptive*? This means, am I meant to apply something to my life or is it just explaining how things were?

Prayer

Having determined what to apply to your life then pray for guidance and wisdom to do the application.

<http://www.biblegateway.com/resources/>

<http://bibleview.riverviewchurch.com.au/>

2/ Exegesis – Deeper Study

This is the careful, systematic study of the Scripture to discover, as much as possible, the original, intended meaning and therefore what it can mean to us.

This is the *first* task to be done by the reader. We need to learn to think about what a particular part of scripture meant to the original people hearing it *before* we move on to discovering what this part of scripture might be saying to us today.

“To read or study the Bible intelligently demands careful reading, and this includes learning to ask the right questions of the text.”⁴

“The result is that we cannot be content learning our own lessons from Scripture, as valuable as they might

⁴ *Ibid*, p26
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be. We must strive to discover what the author (and therefore God) intends to communicate, for that is where the authority is vested.”⁵

Principles of Interpretation

There are a number of important principles to be kept in mind when we seek to understand what Scripture is saying to us;

- 1/ ***Scripture should be interpreted with historical and literary sensitivity.***
It is a product of both God and man.
- 2/ ***Scripture must be interpreted theocentrically.***
The Central actor in the biblical drama is God. Scripture witnesses to the reality of God, to the purposes of God, to the kingdom of God.⁶
- 3/ ***Scripture must be interpreted ecclesially.***
We need to seek our understanding of scripture within the community of faith, the Church.
- 4/ ***Scripture must be interpreted contextually.***
This must leave room for how scripture ‘fits’ us, but also how scripture ‘fits’ others in their particular context.

What information and questions do we need to seek and answer?

The context for understanding any part of the Bible is the historical, religious, literary and cultural context in which this part of the Bible was written.

A good bible dictionary will help to answer these questions.

⁵ A. Hill and J. Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament* (Zondervan, 2009, Grand Rapids) p27

⁶ D. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding 2Ed.* (Eerdmans Publishing, 2004, Grand Rapids) p56

Group Questions:

Read the letter to Titus.

What are some questions that you asked or might ask yourself as you read through the book?

Read the section on Titus from “How to Read the Bible Book by Book”.

Does this help your understanding of what you read in Titus?

(See article from Gordon and Fee)

Take Home Exercise:

Answer the following questions using a Bible dictionary or commentary;

1. Name a prophet that wrote to the northern kingdom of Israel, and one that wrote to the southern kingdom of Judah.
2. Which prophet wrote while in captivity in Babylon?
3. How is wisdom personified in the Proverbs?
4. What might have been a reason for Paul writing to the church in Rome with such a strong theological letter?
5. Why did Paul write his letter to the Galatians?
6. Read Revelation 3:14-22. What details of the city of Laodicea might help us to understand this message?

Memory Work:

Psalm 119:105 Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path