

## Session 4. INTERPRETATION – Getting the big meaning!

### **Why Become A Good Interpreter?**

What reason would you give to someone who says, “Why bother trying to interpret the Bible, isn’t it only a matter of personal opinion?”

What insights and warnings do the following passages give about the importance of understanding and interpreting the Bible properly?

- ⊙ Psalm 119:33-34
- ⊙ 2 Timothy 2:15-18  
“*approved*” literally means pass the test, to be accepted as genuine or authentic  
“*correctly handles*” - literally means to cut straight, right, to skillfully divide
- ⊙ 2 Peter 1:20-21
- ⊙ Hebrews 5:12-14

These are both words of encouragement (our calling) and warning (our caution)

Observation helps us ask the ***right questions*** while interpretation helps us avoid the ***wrong conclusions!***

“Let me *understand* the teaching of your precepts, *then* I will *meditate* on your wonders.” Psalm 119:27 (i.e. *understand* means to reflect on carefully so as to have a change of heart or conduct.)

### **Why Bible Interpretation is Important!**

Roy Zuck, in his fine book, *Basic Bible Interpretation*, gives the following reasons:

1. It is essential for understanding and teaching Bible prophecy in order to prevent...*inadequate attention to and distortion of God’s word*. See: 2 Cor. 4:2 & 2 Peter 3:16
2. It is essential as a necessary step beyond observation... *and foundational to application, without skipping interpretation*. See: Luke 6:46-49 & 1 John 2:4-6
3. It is essential to Identifying and correcting... *deception and false teaching*. See: 2 Peter 2:1-2 & 2 Tim. 3:10, 13-15

False ***interpretation*** leads to false ***application!***

4. It is essential for our own spiritual lives and for... *effectiveness in ministering to others*.

See: Titus 2: 1 & 7-8

Satan’s Plan - Keep us From the Truth!

#### Session 4. INTERPRETATION – Getting the big meaning!

Become a Good Interpreter by following these simple rules:

Rule # 1. **Look first** at the context in and around the passage in question.

Context simply means “that which goes with the text.”

We need to understand the difference between the immediate, surrounding, and wider context.

- ☉ **Immediate Context** – same passage, look at the preceding and following paragraphs
- ☉ **Surrounding Context** – same section, look at the preceding and following chapters in book
- ☉ **Wider Context** – same author, look at additional cross-reference in the Bible (O.T. & N.T).

Paul wrote these words of wisdom: “For I never shrank or kept back or fell short from declaring to you the whole purpose and plan and counsel of God. Take care and be on guard for yourselves... even among yourselves men will come to the front, who by saying perverse (*distorted* and corrupt) things will endeavor to draw away the disciples after them [to their own party].” Acts 20:27-30 Amplified Bible

Remember the words of Luther, “Scripture interprets scripture”

*Quotable Quote:* “A text out of context becomes a pretext for a proof-text.” Robert West

Rule # 2. **Look up...**the meaning of key words in the passage to help determine author’s intent.

- ☉ Don’t assume you know the correct or full meaning of the word.
- ☉ Use available resources to discover the meaning of words in the original languages.

Rule # 3. **Look Back...**at the customs and practices during Biblical times in order to understand the cultural and historical setting of the passage.

In 1 Corinthians 11:6 Paul writes, “It is a disgrace for a woman to shave her head.”

Why does he make such a statement? Is it true for today as well?

- ☉ During Paul’s time, this was a common practice of women who were temple prostitutes in Greece and in sanctuaries in Canaan.
- ☉ There were Canaanite prostitutes in every sanctuary and even most inns.

Source: *Manners and Customs of the Bible*, by Ralph Gower.

Perhaps this was one reason why Jesus and his disciples stayed in homes rather than inns when travelling around the countryside.

## **Rules of Interpretation** (cont.)

Rule # 4. **Look over** all **possible explanations** of the passage in question; don't jump to *your* preset views or *other's* opinions.

"Now the Bereans...received the message with great eagerness **AND** examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true." Acts 17:11

Remember, our greatest resource is the **Holy Spirit** "The Spirit will guide you into all truth." John 16:13

*Quotable Quote:* "The Holy Spirit is the ultimate author of all scripture and he is also our best interpreter. Not only did he orchestrate the composition of God's word, He also reveals its deepest truths within our hearts...As Christians, every time we open the Bible, we can rely on the Holy Spirit to illumine the text." Skip Heitzig, How to Study The Bible and Enjoy it.

Rule # 5. **Look Out...**for **contradicting** the clear teaching of scripture elsewhere or the common interpretation of most Bible\_scholars.

Avoid developing or promoting a **major doctrine** or theological teaching on the basis of 1or 2 passages taken out of context.

## **Questions to Ask Yourself**

1. Is my interpretation of a particular section of scripture **consistent** with the themes, purpose and structure of the book in which it is found?
2. Am I considering the historical and cultural **context** of what is being said?
3. Is my interpretation consistent with **other Scriptures** about the same subject, or is there a glaring difference?

Source: Kay Arthur, *How to Study Your Bible*

*Quotable Quote:*

"Be wary if in your study you find something no one else has ever seen before. God probably would not blind godly men to truth for almost 2,000 years and suddenly reveal it to you."

Kay Arthur, *How to Study Your Bible*

### **Some Do's & Don'ts of Interpretation**

When interpreting a difficult passage of scripture:

**Do** read a **number** of translations & commentaries...

*Don't* rely on just one viewpoint or perspective.

**Do** keep an **open mind** and teachable spirit...

*Don't* accept simplistic or preconceived views and biases.

- ☉ Keep an Open Mind & Heart

**Do** look at the writer's **intent** found in the original language.

*Don't* make the passage say what **YOU** want it to say.

**Do** accept, as a **common rule**, the word's literal meaning...

*Don't* assume it is figurative or symbolic language, unless it is clearly obvious.

*Quotable Quote:* "Our normal tendency is to assume more than we really understand, thus arriving at a superficial view...part of our observation is arriving at clear meaning of words. In difficult interpretive problems, check the original language...compare Scripture with Scripture... Remember, our aim, as good interpreters, is to get at the intended meaning of the writer. Apart from that, we are just playing games, probably to justify our preconceptions." Bob Smith, *Basics of Bible Interpretation*

Seek Truth Not Opinions!

### **Interpretation - Some Final Thoughts**

Remember, the best interpreter for the Bible **is the Bible** and the Bible will **never** contradict itself!

- ☉ Psalm 19:7 says, "The word of the Lord is *perfect*, reviving the soul."
- ☉ Proverbs 30:5 says, "Every word of God is flawless...do **NOT** add to his words."

Like Jesus' life & ministry (John 21:25) there is much more that can be said on this subject.

Keep **looking** & **learning**!

**Be a Life-long Learner!** Paul wrote, "Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I *press on* to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me." Phil. 3:12

## **Part 2. The WHAT of Bible Interpretation (cont.)**

### **Part 1. Principles of Interpretation**

Words to the Wise Interpreter!

- ⦿ “A fool finds no pleasure in understanding but delights in airing his *own* opinions.” Prov. 18:2
- ⦿ “It is not good to have zeal without knowledge, nor to be hasty and *miss* the way.” Prov. 19:2

**General Principles of Interpretation:** In addition to the 5 Rules of Interpretation, there are 5 General Principles of Interpretation to follow: They are:

1. Use your God-given wisdom, reason and common sense to avoid unusual or extreme interpretations. See: Eccles. 7:18-19  
Point: Use your inductive study method and reasoning process to make careful observations and analysis of the passage in order to develop accurate interpretations.
2. Accept the authority & teachings of Scripture as having priority even over personal experience. See: 2 Peter 1: 16-20

Quotable Quotes: “We can be assured that when we discover the proper interpretation of a verse it will be reasonable and rational and will not contradict the rest of the Scriptures.” Chuck Smith

“Interpret the Bible from the assumption that the Bible is authoritative. Why? Quite simply, the Bible is a divine book.” Dade Ronan

3. Take the time and effort to search out God’s truth rather than simply relying on your limited understandings and personal opinion. See: Proverbs 3:5-7 & 18:2
4. Avoid the teachings of “Modern-day” prophets or Bible critics, who mistakenly think they offer a more accurate understanding and interpretation of the Bible. See: Galatians 1:6-8

Quotable Quote: Interpret personal experience in light of Scripture and not Scripture in light of personal experience... Each Christian has the right and responsibility to investigate and interpret the Word of God.” Dade Ronan

5. Deals with recognizing and understanding that people during Bible times spoke and read their language differently than we do today.

*Individual Activity:* Try to translate the following phrase: GNRWSNTNMRCSD

Re-write the phrase here: \_\_\_\_\_

Did you know that the Bible was written...

- ⦿ over... *a period of almost 1,500 years – Genesis (1,400 B.C.) to Revelation (90 A.D.)*
- ⦿ about... *3,415 years ago.*
- ⦿ by... *over 40 different authors.*
- ⦿ in... *at least 3 ancient languages.*

No wonder we sometimes have difficulty in understanding the Bible and correctly interpreting it.

Guidelines for Identifying Figurative Language - The following is a list of additional guidelines suggested by Roy Zuck:

1. Always take a passage in its literal sense unless there is good reason for doing otherwise. See: Revelations 7:4-10
2. The figurative sense is intended if the literal word is an impossibility. See: Micah 1:2
3. The figurative meaning is intended if the literal meaning is an absurdity (i.e. makes no sense). See: Isaiah 55:12
4. Take the figurative sense if the literal means suggests inappropriate or ridiculous behavior. See: John 6:53
5. Note whether the figurative expression is followed by an explanatory literal statement. See: 1 Thessalonians 4:15-16
6. Sometimes figurative language is marked by a qualifying adjective, word (simile) or phrase (prepositional). See: John 6:32-33 & Micah 1:3-4

*Reasons for Using Figurative Language* (given by Roy Zuck)

Figures of speech...

- ⦿ Add... *color and vividness to the story or narrative.* See: Psalm 62:2
- ⦿ Attract listener's... *attention, surprise, or interest.* See: James 3:6
- ⦿ Make abstract ideas... *more understandable.* See: Deut. 33:29
- ⦿ Make an impression and... *are easily remembered.* See: Matt. 23:27-28
- ⦿ Capture and convey... *an idea or many ideas, in a brief way.* See: Psalm 23:1
- ⦿ Encourage... *thinking and reflection.* See: Songs of Solomon 4:9-11

The Bible is full of figures of speech. Bible scholar, E.W. Bullinger, suggests there are **1,000** figures of speech in more than **31** different categories.