

Interpretation

It is impossible to apply the Word of God until you understand it. In fact, the better you understand it, the better you can apply it. That's why David prayed, "Give me understanding, and I will keep your law and obey it with all my heart" (Psalm 119:34).

Acting on what God has said assumes that you understand what He has said. That's why the second major step in firsthand Bible study is the step of **Interpretation**. Here you ask and answer the question: *What does it mean?*

What Do We Mean by Interpretation?

Every book of Scripture has a message that can be understood. Do you ever wonder sometimes whether the Bible is just a giant riddle? God intended it as a revelation. Second Timothy 3:16 says, "All Scripture is profitable..." God is not playing a game of hide-and-seek with you. He doesn't invite you into His Word only to puzzle and confound you. He's far more interested that you understand it than you are.

So what do we mean by "meaning"? In Bible interpretation, two people will look at the same verse and come up with two completely different interpretations. In fact, they may be opposing interpretations but can they both be correct? Not if the laws of logic apply to Scripture.

But unfortunately, many people today have decided that the laws of logic do not apply to Scripture. To them, it doesn't really matter if you see the text as blue and I see it as green. In fact, it doesn't really matter what color the text actually is. For them, the meaning of the text is not in the text, it's in their response to the text and everyone is free to have his or her own response. Meaning becomes purely subjective or based on or influenced by personal feelings or opinions.

If we're going to have any hope of interpreting God's Word accurately, we've got to start with a fundamental premise: "Meaning" is not our subjective thoughts read into the text, but God's objective truth read out of the text. The task of Bible study is to think God's thoughts after Him. He has a mind, and He has revealed it in His Word. The miracle is that He used human authors to do so. Working through their personalities, their circumstances, and their concerns, the Holy Spirit superintended the crafting of a document.

That's why I like to refer to the step of interpretation as the *re-creation process*. We're attempting to stand in the author's shoes and re-create his experience - to think as he thought, to feel as he felt, and to decide as he decided. We're asking what does it mean to him BEFORE we ask, what does it mean to us?

The quality of our interpretation will always depend on the quality of your observation. It is impossible to understand what a writer means until we notice what the writer says. Therefore, to observe well is to interpret well.

Why Interpretation?

But the question remains: Why must we interpret Scripture? Why can't we just open the Word, read what we're supposed to do, and then do it? Why do we have to go to so much trouble to understand the text? The answer is that time and distance have thrown up barriers between us and the biblical writers, which block our understanding.

REAL TALK FROM THE WORD

Here a few of them listed below:

- Language barriers - Have you ever learned a foreign language? If so, you know that learning the words is not enough. You have to learn the mind-set, the culture, the worldview of those who speak it if you really want to understand what they are saying. In the same way, when it comes to the Bible we have some excellent translations from the Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic languages in which it was originally written. Even so, the text leaves us a long way from a complete understanding. That's why the process of Interpretation involves the use of a Bible dictionary and similar resources.
- Cultural barriers - Language is always culture-bound. The Bible is the product of and presentation of cultures that are dramatically different from our own - and also different from each other. To appreciate what is going on in the Scripture, we have to reconstruct the cultural context in areas of communication, transportation, trade, agriculture, occupations, religion, and so on.
- Literary barriers - Literary genres of the Bible are quite diverse and demand vastly different approaches. We can't read the Song of Solomon with the same cold logic that we bring to Romans. We won't get the point of the parables through the same exhaustive word studies that might unlock truths in Galatians.
- Communication barriers - We still must contend with breakdowns in the communication process. As finite creatures, we can never know what is going on in someone else's mind completely. As a result, we have to settle for limited objectives in our interpretation of Scripture. We can't get tied up in knots over the problems and unanswerable questions that come up in in our study of the Bible. The miracle is that that we can understand all of the essential things that God wants us to understand for our eternal salvation and for our daily living.

Review of Observation

If students of Scripture were given only one instruction, it would be to Look! Look! Look! The truth of God is in the Bible, but most people miss it primarily because they don't look for it. They never put forth the time and effort required to answer the fundamental question of Observation, What do I see? As a result, they have no basis for understanding what God has revealed.

In this section we've been given an introduction into this process of seeing. As pointed out, Observation is only the first step in Bible study method. But it's an absolute critical step, and unfortunately one to which most people pay little attention.

We've seen that in order to observe Scripture, we first must learn to read. We have to learn to read the Bible better and faster, as for the first time, and as though we were reading a love letter. And we looked at 10 strategies that can help us become first-rate readers of God's Word.

- Read thoughtfully
 - Read repeatedly
 - Read patiently
 - Read selectively
 - Read prayerfully
 - Read imaginatively
 - Read meditatively
 - Read purposefully
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REAL TALK FROM THE WORD

- Read acquisitively
- Read telescopically

Then we learned what to look for in the biblical text. We discovered six clues that unlock the text for our understanding:

- Things emphasized
- Things repeated
- Things related
- Things alike
- Things unlike
- Things that are true to life

We learned that there is no end to the amount of detail that the observant person can uncover and all of it leads to greater insight.