

## 5 Keys To Interpretation

When the psalmist prayed to God, “Give me understanding, that I may observe Thy law, and keep it with all my heart” (Psalm 119:34), He was knocking on the door of Interpretation. He realized that apart from understanding the meaning of the text, there could be no application of the Word to his life. Conversely, once the Spirit opened the door of insight, he was prepared to act on what God had said.

In this lesson, I want to offer the first of five keys that will help you unlock the biblical text, five basic principles of Interpretation. The first key is one you already possess:

- **Content** - there is a direct cause-effect relationship between content and meaning. The content of a passage is the raw material, the database, with which you will interpret the text. Because of your work in Observation, you already know quite a bit about how to determine the content of a passage. Remember, you looked for terms, structure, literary form, and atmosphere. You asked a series of penetrating, practical questions: who, what, where, when, why, wherefore. You looked for things that are emphasized, repeated, related, alike, unlike, and true to life.
- **Context** - the Bible is a 66-book collection, but it hangs together as one Book. It’s a unified whole. And that’s the principle on which the second key of biblical interpretation depends: Context. Context refers to that which goes before and that which follows after. There are several kinds of context. Each one gives a different slant on whatever passage you are considering.
  - **Literary context** - the literary context of any verse is the paragraph of which it is a part, the section of which that paragraph is a part, and the book of which that section is a part. And, given the unity of Scripture, the ultimate context is the entire Bible.
  - **Historical context** - when is it taking place? Where does this passage fit in history? What else was taking place in the world at this time? What were some of the social, political, and technological influences on the writer and on those to whom he was writing?
  - **Cultural context** - culture has a powerful influence on all forms of communication, and the cultures in biblical times had a profound effect on the creation of the Bible. So the more you know about ancient cultures, the more insight you’ll have into the text.
  - **Geographic context** - geography is a fascinating subject that is incredibly relevant to the interpretation of Scripture. Investigating the geographical context answers questions such as: What was the terrain like? What was the weather like? How far was this town from places mentioned in the text? What were the transportation routes for these people? What was this location known for?
  - **Theological context** - what did this author know about God? What was the relationship of his readers to God? How did people worship Him at that point? One of the helpful resources you’ll want to turn to as you investigate theological context is a commentary.
- **Comparison** - this is the best insurance against distorting God’s Word. In comparison, we compare Scripture with Scripture which offers a great safety net because the greatest interpreter of Scripture is Scripture itself. A concordance is a tool to that is helpful to comparison. It is a tool that enables you to chase down terms and concepts from one book of the Bible to the next.

## REAL TALK FROM THE WORD

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- **Culture** - we must pay attention to the cultural and historical context and to the factors that led to the writing of the passage, the influences they had on the text, and what happened as a result of the message.
- **Consultation** - involves the use of secondary resources. They can shed light on the text that will help you make more sense out of what you're looking at.
  - These 5 will help get you started on building a valuable tool chest to use in your interpretational work:
    - *Concordances* are somewhat like an index to the Bible. It lists all of the words of the text alphabetically, with references for where they appear, along with a few surrounding words to give some context. They are also profitable for word studies and can help you locate a passage when you can't remember its reference.
    - *Bible dictionaries* provide loads of helpful information on subjects in the text. Some dictionaries tell you what the word means as well as how they are used and all of their variations.
    - *Bible handbooks* are related to the Bible dictionary. It is sort of a one-volume encyclopedia. They provide biblical events and all kinds of background materials. For instance, you may want to know about food. There are many passages in which food is mentioned, but it was altogether different than the food we have today. You can look it up and find a whole section on food and drink and its preparation. After you consult a resource such as this and get the background, you start to find all kinds of insights into the Scriptures that eluded you before. This kind of detail makes the Word of God come alive.
    - *Atlases* fill in the story behind the places mentioned in Scripture. Geography is one of the most helpful sciences to Bible study and yet people completely bypass the significance of place in the account. For instance, cities that Paul visited-Antioch, Corinth, and Ephesus are just dots. A page to most readers. Yet these were major metropolitan centers with populations in the hundreds of thousands, every bit as cosmopolitan and sophisticated as any in our country today.
    - *Bible commentaries* offer you insights of someone who has perhaps spent his whole life studying the text. It can't do your study for you, but it certainly is an excellent means of evaluating your own study. Commentaries can be a blessing and a curse. The downside is the tendency to start depending on them rather than familiarizing yourself with the biblical text. There's nothing wrong with commentaries, but remember, they are just one person's opinion, they are very not inspired. But at the same time, a scholar who has spent a lifetime investigating the biblical text can frequently get you past the barriers to understanding and his comments can help you evaluate your own personal study.