

INTERPRETATION

Dr. Greg Bourgond – Adapted from Multiple Sources

What does the passage mean?

When interpreting a passage your objective is to determine what the passage meant by the original author at the time of its writing.

Here the interpreter bombards the text with questions such as, “What did these details mean to the people to whom they were given. Why did the author say this? What is the major idea the author is seeking to communicate?”

Interpretation answers the following general questions.

What is the context? What did it mean then? What does it mean today?

PROCEDURE

1. **Use a literal Bible** (i.e., NIV, NRSV, NASV). Work from the assumption that the Bible is authoritative. The primary purpose of the Bible is to change our lives, not increase our knowledge.
2. **Read the verse or passage in context.**
3. **Review cross-references.**
4. **Apply the seven basic rules of interpretation.** (Adapted from *Understand* by Walter A. Henrichsen)
 - Interpret the Bible in light of its language, history, and culture. Use the normal meaning of the words.

Be careful to note the type of language used (i.e., narration, poetry, prophesy) and figures of speech (i.e., hyperbole, metaphor, simile, analogy, etc. See *Figures of Speech* handout).

When an inanimate object is used to describe a living being, the statement may be considered figurative. When an expression is out of character with the thing described, the statement may be considered figurative.

- Allow Scripture to interpret Scripture. Consider the whole counsel of God’s word to shed light on the passage being analyzed. Consult cross-references.

This rule answers the question, “How does this relate to the rest of what the Bible says.”

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- Individual verses of the Bible must be understood in the context of other verses in that passage.

Interpret a word in relation to its sentence and context.
Interpret a passage in harmony with its context.

- Each passage of Scripture has one interpretation. There maybe, however, more than one application.

Interpret personal experience in the light of Scripture, not Scripture in the light of personal experience.

- Do not build major doctrines or positions on isolated or unclear verses of the Bible.

Biblical examples are authoritative only when supported by a command (i.e., John 3:34-35). A doctrine cannot be considered Biblical unless it sums up and includes all that the Scriptures may say about it. When two doctrines taught in the Bible appear to be contradictory, accept both as Scriptural in the confident belief that they resolve themselves into a higher unity.

- In most cases, like the rest of the Bible, parables have one basic meaning.
- There are two guardrails along the highway of correct Bible interpretation: the Holy Spirit and the Christian community.

Saving faith and the Holy Spirit are necessary for us to understand and properly interpret the Scriptures.

5. Use common Biblical resources.

- An exhaustive concordance.
- A Bible dictionary or encyclopedia.
- A Bible handbook.
- A Bible atlas.
- A topical Bible.
- A Bible introduction or survey.
- Bible customs and traditions.
- A good (and current) commentary.

6. Summarize findings.

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7. Derive timeless truths.

KEYS TO INTERPRETATION

- Content
- Context
- Comparison
- Culture
- Consultation

INTERPRETATION EXERCISES:

1. Genesis 3:1-7
2. Psalm 1:1-6
3. Psalm 15:1-5
4. Psalm 139:1-18
5. Matthew 4:1-11
6. Matthew 5:1-12
7. John 4:46-54
8. John 14:23-27; 16:5-15
9. John 15:1-8
10. Romans 1:1-18
11. 1 Corinthians 3:10-15
12. Galatians 5:16-26
13. Ephesians 4:1-16
14. Ephesians 4:17-24
15. Philippians 2:5-11
16. 2 Timothy 3:16-17
17. Titus 2:11-14
18. Hebrews 4:12
19. James 2:14-26
20. 1 John 2:15-17