

4. Rules to Interpret By

Introduction

***“There is only One Interpretation
but Many Applications!”***

“The primary purpose of interpretation is to discover what the author meant by what he said, to discover his purpose and message. You should try to put yourself in his place and recapture his thoughts, attitudes and emotions. You should try to recreate in your mind the experiences of the author to discover why he wrote what he did in a certain historical situation for a specific purpose. Also you should try to understand the people for whom he was writing.”

(From the Joy of Discovery by Oletta Wald)

Bible Interpretation

In Interpretation, we will be piecing together the parts of the puzzle we discovered in our Observations in order to answer the question, “What does the passage mean?” It is important to keep in mind that **“there is only one interpretation”** to a passage. Because of this, it is crucial that the Bible Student be meticulous in his study, while at the same time, remaining humble and willing to adjust his interpretation as his understanding of the passage grows. *We must always be on guard against a prideful heart which can cause us to be closed to a more correct interpretation, especially when suggested by others!* How can we ensure the accuracy of our interpretations? By establishing **Principles** with which to Interpret Scripture!

These Principles encourage an objective and methodical search for the **meaning** of a passage. They enable us to remain **objective** in arriving at an Interpretation. The Interpretation can then be analyzed according to these same **Principles** by others and, if necessary, be revised!

Let us first begin with a few terms that are associated with the study of Scripture. ***The science of Bible Interpretation and the study of the Principles it involves is called Hermeneutics.*** The application of these Principles in our study of the Bible is called *Exegesis*. And teaching others the Interpretation we have arrived at is called *Exposition*. Therefore, *Bible teachers use Hermeneutics to Exegete Scripture in order to present Expository lessons.* As we examine these Principles, remember:

“the primary purpose of interpretation is
to discover what the author meant by what he said”

We must always guard against trying to make the Bible say what WE want it to say!

The Principles of Bible Interpretation

1. Always Interpret Scripture in Light of Its Context.

We must always interpret a passage **in relation to the verses before and after it**. The word “*context*” means **with** (*con*) the **text**. Failure to follow this Principle will result in erroneous interpretations since the meaning of the words are almost always linked to their context. For example, did you know that the Bible states “***There is no God***” (*Psalm 14:1*)? But a study of this statement’s context shows that “***The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’***” You can see how context can make a **BIG** difference!

But how much of a passage’s context should we examine? The answer is *as much as you are able*, for the more of the context you know, the less chance of an erroneous interpretation of the passage. Consider the following:

- At Minimum** ~ Read the verses *prior to* and *after* the passage you are studying.
- Better Yet** ~ Read the *entire Chapter* in which the passage is found.
- Even Better** ~ Read the *entire Book* in which the passage is found.
- Best** ~ Read the *entire Bible*.

2. Interpret Scripture by Scripture.

This Principle is related to the first and states that ***all Interpretations of Scripture must correlate with the teaching of the Bible as a whole***. It also means that *whenever Scripture interprets another Scripture, that Interpretation is correct*. When interpreting any passage, first see if the Bible already contains an interpretation of that passage!

Example: *Jesus Explains The Parable of the Sower (Mark 4:2-20)*

3. Interpret According to the Proper Definition of the Words.

A correct understanding of a Scripture passage begins with ***a correct understanding of the words*** that make up that passage. This can be done in various ways:

- a. **A Dictionary** will provide various meanings of a word to choose from. *A Bible Dictionary* is especially useful in providing definitions specific to Biblical words. *Strong’s Concordance* also includes brief definitions of *Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic* words. If you are able, purchase reference books that will enable you to work in the original languages of Scripture. If possible, take a class in *Greek* or *Hebrew* to familiarize yourself with the original languages.
- b. **The Context** of a word is vital to understand its meaning [see #1 above].
- c. **A Concordance** directs us to other verses where ***that same word*** is used. Bible Students do well to *examine every use of the word, first by the same author and then by other Bible authors to understand how it is used through out Scripture*.

4. Interpret According to Correct Grammar.

Though for many people *grammar does not denote a favorite subject in school*, for the Bible Student, it is important that the rules of grammar be noted and followed. *Interpretations must conform to grammatical rules*. If you are in need of a refresher course, purchase a grammar book and study it. Train yourself to recognize the *subject* and related *verbs* of a sentence - the *direct object, adjectives* and *adverbs*. Make sure you are able to correctly identify *pronouns* and their *antecedents*, as well as analyze *verbs* and their *tenses*. All of this, and more, are crucial to obtain correct interpretations.

5. Interpret According to the Historical, Geographical and Cultural Background

One of the great challenges of a Bible Interpreter is to bridge the gap between the *time, place and culture* of the Biblical authors and our own. A common mistake of many Bible Students is to read the Bible from a modern mind set while ignoring the fact that the original authors lived in a different time and place. We must *research* and *recreate* that time and place in order to better understand what the author meant when he wrote the Scripture.

Bible Encyclopedias, Reference Books and Commentaries can teach us much about the *History* and *Culture* of a passage. *Bible Atlases* help us to *visualize the Geographic surroundings*. These Reference Tools help us bridge the gap that separate us from the original authors and help us to better understand the true meaning of the Bible.

6. Interpret According to the Normal Meaning of the Words Unless That Meaning is Clearly Inadequate

Another common mistake of Bible Students is to *spiritualize* or find a *deeper [secondary]* meaning besides the *literal* meaning of a passage. It is tempting to seek hidden meanings in Scripture, but unless the passage indicates this, it is always best to interpret a passage according to its literal or normal meaning. Instances when it becomes necessary to find a secondary meaning are:

1. Metaphors and Similes
2. Parables or Allegories
3. Poetic Passages Using Imagery
4. Prophetic Passages Using Symbolic Language
5. Hyperboles

(Though this principle seems to violate the “one interpretation” principle, it really does not. In the instances cited above, a secondary meaning is indicated by the literary genre or device, but even then, there is still one correct interpretation!)

Bible Reference Resources:

1. Bible Dictionaries ~ Ranges from single to multi-volume sets.

Vines Expository Dictionary

Do It Yourself Hebrew and Greek by Edward W. Goodrick - *Introduction to the original languages and how to use reference books to analyse them*

Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament by Harris, Archer and Waltke - *excellent two volume dictionary of Old Testament words using the Strongs Concordance numbering system to locate specific words.*

Dictionary of New Testament Theology edited by Colin Brown - *excellent three volume dictionary of New Testament words giving Classical, Septuagint and New Testament usage of Greek words.*

Wuest's Word Studies - *Four volumes with clear explanations of New Testament words.*

2. Concordance ~ An **exhaustive Concordance** will give you **every** reference for every word in the Bible. Note that Concordances are written **according to the various Bible Translations. Buy the same version as the Bible you use for Bible Study.**

Strongs Concordance - *excellent exhaustive concordance with a numbering system to aid in determining the meaning of the word in its original form.*

Youngs Analytical Concordance - *excellent concordance for tracing a word's usage in other passages.*

3. Bible Encyclopedias ~ These are indispensable for general, historical and cultural knowledge.

The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia (ISBE)

The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible

4. Bible Commentaries ~ **Commentaries**, which contain interpretations by various authors, should be used **only** to reference how others interpret a passage you are studying, and **never** to become dependent on the interpretations of others!

Available in Single and Multi Volume Sets

5. Bible Atlas ~ Excellent reference to visualize the physical setting and location of the events in a passage.

6. Reference Books ~ These include references on Bible customs, Theology, or Topics of interest to the study you are doing.

ie "*The New Manners and Customs of Bible Times*" by Ralph Gower

7. Books on Hermeneutics ~

"*How to Understand Your Bible*" by **T. Norton Sterrett**

"*Protestant Biblical interpretation*" by **Bernard Ramm**

8. Bible Study Software ~ There are many excellent Software that combine reference tools and versions of the Bible in one program. This greatly increases our ability to search and analyze Scripture, with incredible savings in the time utilized.

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