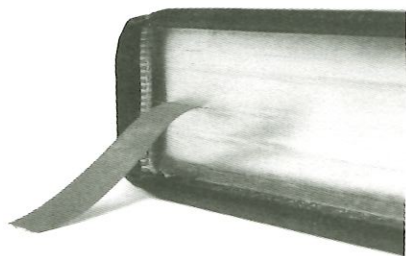


Required Principles of Interpretation



Topic

Bible interpretation

Theme

God expects believers to interpret the Bible carefully so that they might learn His truth in His Word.

Desired Learner Response

The learner will determine to use careful Bible interpretation.

Materials

- Resource 9
- Visual 4
- Novel

Scripture Focus

2 Kings 22:8–20; Ps. 19:7–11; John 17:17; 2 Tim. 3:16, 17; 1 Pet. 5:6

Summary

Consistently literal interpretation of Scripture follows distinct rules. This lesson covers those rules.

Outline

I. Presuppositions to Bible Interpretation

II. Principles for Bible Interpretation

- Interpret literally
- Discover the authorial intent
- Consider context

Memory Verse

*“For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments”
(Ezra 7:10).*

GETTING STARTED

Cheese!

Display the first part of visual 4 that shows a woman smiling and saying cheese.

ASK: Why do you think this woman is saying cheese?

ASK: How might you know if you guessed correctly?

Display the second part of visual 4. Point out that the woman is standing in a cheese shop and is hoping to sell cheese to customers.

We learned in lesson six that the Holy Spirit helps us understand the Bible as we are diligent to study it. Lesson seven presented the case for *sola scriptura*. This lesson will help us understand principles for interpreting Scripture. One of those principles is to study a passage in its context, a rule that keeps us from misunderstanding and misapplying a passage.

Paragraphs out of Context

Read a couple of paragraphs from the middle of a novel. After you ask the questions below, tell your learners about the novel's plot line and how the paragraphs fit into the story.

ASK: What do you think those paragraphs are about?

ASK: How might you know if you were correct in your analysis?

We learned in lesson six that the Holy Spirit helps us understand the Bible as we are diligent to study it. Lesson seven presented the case for *sola scriptura*. This lesson will help us understand principles for interpreting Scripture. One of those principles is to study a passage in its context, a rule that keeps us from misunderstanding and misapplying a passage.

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

Portions of this lesson are from the Truth for Living course called *Why Dispensationalism Matters*. Consider getting that course for a full treatment of dispensationalism, including an analysis of Reformed theology. It is available at RegularBaptistPress.org.

I. Presuppositions to Bible Interpretation

Presuppositions are the implicit assumptions we make before embarking on a study, investigation, or dialogue. Our presuppositions guide our worldviews and give us a framework for understanding what we observe. Before we embark on Bible interpretation, it is good to understand the presuppositions that should guide our process.

First, we need to recognize that God has provided objective truth for us in His Word (Ps. 19:7–11). That means we should expect to find *the* truth (John 17:17) in the Bible rather than *our* truth. God's Word does not exist for us to twist and bend in order to create our own truth.

Second, we need to understand that God's truth neither changes nor contradicts itself. It is not subject to our opinions and feelings. Instead, God's Word is authoritative. It is the *final* word and the only word that really matters. That means

we ought to approach God's Word with humility, submitting ourselves to its supreme authority and sanctifying effects (2 Tim. 3:16, 17; 1 Pet. 5:6).

ASK: Given these presuppositions, what should our goal be as we seek to interpret the Bible? (Q3) *To uncover God's truth and to humbly submit ourselves to its authority.*

King Josiah provides an excellent example of having correct presuppositions about God's Word and then responding to God's Word accordingly.

READ: 2 Kings 22:8–13. **ASK:** Based on Josiah's actions, what would you say were his presuppositions concerning the Book of the Law (the Pentateuch)? (Q4) *Without hesitating he assumed that the Book of the Law is God's Word and that it reveals objective truth that can be known.*

READ: 2 Kings 22:14–17. **ASK:** Why might Josiah have ignored or discredited God's Word? Consider Judah's situation at that time. (Q5) *Judah had forsaken God and burned incense to false gods. He would be tempted to ignore or discredit God's Word in order to try to avoid the consequences of Judah's sin.*

READ: 2 Kings 22:18–20. **ASK:** How did Josiah personally respond to the Book of the Law? (Q6) *He humbled himself before God with a tender heart.*

The presuppositions that God's Word is true, accessible, and unchangeable are foundational. They set up the Word as our authority on all that the Bible reveals. So with these foundational presuppositions in mind, we need to be aware of the principles for studying and understanding God's Word.

II. Principles for Bible Interpretation

There are certain principles that should guide our Bible interpretation. We must observe them without wavering if we are to arrive at a correct understanding of the Scriptures.

A. Interpret literally

The first principle of sound Bible interpretation is to interpret Scripture literally. *Literal* interpretation means a straightforward, normal reading of the text. It includes the realization that normal language employs the use of figures of speech. So literal interpretation recognizes the need to interpret the figurative language in a figurative sense.

READ: Psalm 23. **ASK:** What are some of the truths David communicated by his figurative speech in this psalm? (Q7) *He communicated God's loving care for him.*

READ: John 6:35. **ASK:** What did Jesus mean when He called Himself the bread of life? (Q8) *That He gives eternal life to those who trust in Him.*

Literal interpretation is the term used in opposition to *spiritual* or *allegorical* interpretation. It is important to understand the difference, starting with the origin

of the two methods of interpretation.

Literal interpretation was practiced by Jesus and the New Testament writers, who interpreted the Old Testament in a literal sense (Matt. 4:4, 7, 10; Luke 4:16–21; Rom. 3:10–18). The early church continued to use literal interpretation until around AD 135 when Jewish pastors were replaced by Greek pastors in Jerusalem. Eventually the Greek pastors were influenced by Greek thought, particularly when Augustine began promoting spiritual interpretation in the fourth century AD.

Spiritual interpretation has its origins several hundred years before Augustine. Plato, a Greek philosopher from the fifth and fourth centuries BC, developed a non-literal method of interpreting Greek religious writings in order to avoid the embarrassment of the Greek gods' immoral behavior recorded in those writings. Plato believed the religious documents were actually meant to point the reader to a deeper *spiritual* meaning. So the non-literal, allegorical interpretation was called the *spiritual* interpretation. Today, *spiritual* interpretation means taking the words of a Bible text and treating them as if they were merely a metaphor or allegory for some meaning obscured or hidden behind the literal text.

Some Bible passages seem to be figurative when they are not. So the interpreter needs to be careful. For instance, God's promises about the future city of Jerusalem appear to be figurative (Isa. 60:10–21). Yet there is no reason to consider them anything less than literal.

READ: Isaiah 60:10–21. **ASK:** What are some of the prophecies about a future, glorious day for the city of Jerusalem? (Q9) *Jerusalem will be an actual city with walls built by Gentiles; the gates of Jerusalem will remain open day and night; beautiful trees from foreign nations will beautify the temple; neither the sun nor the moon will need to shine there.*

When Isaiah 60:10–21 is interpreted literally, it helps to solidify the testimony of God's faithfulness to Israel, which in turn builds the reader's confidence in God's faithfulness to him. A literal interpretation also provides an accurate understanding about Israel's future.

B. Discover the authorial intent

In a world that is increasingly driven by political correctness, people are hesitant to tell others when their opinion is wrong. But when it comes to interpreting Scripture, everyone is *not* entitled to his own opinion. So beginning a group Bible study by asking everyone to share what a passage means to them is potentially disastrous. Most likely people in the Bible study group will share errant interpretations. Some will frankly say what they *want* the passage to mean because the meaning is convenient for them and fits their needs at that point in their life. But Bible study is not about projecting one's personal interpretation onto a text.

Bible study is about discovering the *author's* intent. A passage can have more than one appropriate application, but it can have only *one* meaning. The single meaning of a text must be determined on the basis of what the original author intended it to mean. Determining author intent is of high importance for accurate interpretation.

We practice the rule of determining author intent every time we read a new article. For example, if a news reporter wrote *three people died in a plane crash*, we

would not understand it to mean that the author was using a plane crash to tell us that *three people had their dreams come crashing to earth*. Text has meaning, and the meaning is to be determined by what the original author intended. Based on that single meaning, we may be able to determine multiple applications to our lives. Too often, in our haste to make the Bible relevant to our lives, we skip the work of determining the meaning of the text, and go right to trying to determine the application.

ASK: What is so tempting about applying a passage before we know the author's intent for the passage? (Q10) *It is easier to come up with an application than it is to actually study a passage and come to a proper interpretation.*

There are actually some academics who argue for the legitimacy of multiple meanings for written texts. This theory of linguistics is known as the *Reader Response Theory*. One area where we see this played out in America is in how some legal experts interpret the US Constitution. They view it as a fluid or living document. They believe the meaning of the Constitution can change from what its authors originally intended. This kind of legal reasoning is used to justify certain interpretations of the Constitution that run contrary to a strict constitutionalist approach. Of course with this approach, one could get the Constitution to mean just about anything, effectively rendering the Constitution worthless. Much the same thing happens when it comes to the Bible. There are strict literalists who hold to a single meaning of the Bible, and there are those who believe that the Bible is a living document whose meaning can change in different times and cultures.

ASK: How would your view of the Bible change if it was a fluid document with changing meanings? (Q11)

Some theologians are also guilty of violating the principle of single meaning. They do so to advance their theological understanding of the Bible. Covenant theologians, for example, find second meanings for passages on Israel and the future kingdom because an earthly, millennial Kingdom of Christ is not part of their theological understanding. In Luke 1:32 and 33 the angel Gabriel told Mary that Jesus *shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end*. Luke obviously meant that Jesus will sit on a literal throne in Jerusalem ruling over the nation of Israel (the house of Jacob). Covenant theologians believe the passage can mean that Jesus will sit on a heavenly throne ruling in the hearts of Christians who have trusted Him as Savior. In this case, Luke's intent could not have been to communicate both meanings because both can't be right. Luke's message means only what the angel intended for Mary to understand by these words. Mary's understanding was undoubtedly based on what Mary knew from the Old Testament Scriptures and specifically the Davidic Covenant recorded in 2 Samuel 7 and Psalm 89. The Davidic Covenant promised that Israel's Messiah would come from the descendants of David and that he would rule over the nation of Israel.

Finding a meaning to fit one's theological understanding is not appropriate Bible interpretation. Sound interpreters will let the clear authorial intent dictate the meaning of the text.

C. Consider context

There is no greater principle of interpretation than this: Any text of Scripture must be understood based on how it is used in its context. Context includes the immediate verses, the chapter, the book, and even the entire Bible. That is why the more familiar we become with the whole Bible, the more equipped we will be to understand the books, chapters, and verses of the Bible.

Context is often a crucial determiner of the correct meaning of a text. One can appear to prove most anything from the Bible by yanking verses out of context. Philippians 4:13 provides an example of the need to consider context before drawing conclusions about a text.

READ: Philippians 4:13. **ASK:** What does this verse appear to mean? (Q12)
That Christ will help a person do anything he sets his mind to.

Some people have used Philippians 4:13 to justify some fantastic claims. What did Paul mean by *all things*? Did he mean that he could swim across the Mediterranean Sea without drowning? Most likely you wouldn't agree to such an application, but how would you know? Context tells us.

READ: Philippians 4:10–19. **ASK:** What do you notice about the context around verse 13? (Q13)

There is a paragraph that begins in verse 10 and ends with verse 13. The paragraph divisions in the Bible are the result of the translators' judgment; they are not inspired. However, they are worth heeding in the initial phases of the study. In the context of the paragraph, we observe that the Philippians had shown concern for Paul's circumstances. According to verse 12, his circumstances included both poverty and plenty. In reading verses 14 through 19, the paragraph that follows verse 13, it becomes clear that the Philippians had shown their concern by sending a financial gift to support Paul's ministry. That relieved a difficult situation and allowed Paul to be fully supplied (4:18). And though Paul had been in need before their gift arrived (4:11, 12), he had still served Christ. After his need was met plentifully, he planned to continue to serve Christ. His contentment was not based on his circumstances. Christ was his strength, whether he had much or whether he had little. The apostle Paul could do everything necessary to serve Christ because Christ would strengthen him to keep on in poverty or in plenty. So *I can do all things* is defined by its context to include all things that involve service for Christ no matter what the circumstances. Observing the context leads us to understand the true meaning of the passage.

Part of considering context is to let Scripture interpret Scripture. This rule might seem unnecessary, if we assume that all Scripture is plain and easy to understand. But there are plenty of Bible passages that are difficult to interpret. Turning to other Scriptures for information on how to interpret a difficult passage is essentially considering the passage's greater context. And since the Bible does not contradict itself, consulting the rest of the Bible in order to shed light on a difficult passage is the most accurate way to interpret the passage.

Unfortunately, many false doctrines have been birthed from misinterpretations of difficult passages or passages that are not immediately clear. For example,

the Mormons use Ezekiel 37:15–17 to teach that God planned for the Book of Mormon and that He recognizes it as equal to the Bible.

READ: Ezekiel 37:15–17. **ASK:** What would you think this passage is about without reading its context? (Q14)

The Mormons believe that the two sticks are two scrolls which were rolled up on sticks and then joined. They say the first scroll represents the Bible and the second scroll represents the Book of Mormon. Obviously this passage is crucial to their belief that the Book of Mormon was ordained by God.

READ: Ezekiel 37:18–22. **ASK:** What explanation does the context provide for this obscure passage? (Q15)

God wanted Ezekiel to use the two sticks as visual aids in talking about the future for the divided kingdoms of Judah and Israel (Ephraim). Eventually God was going to join the two kingdoms together again. The passage, when considered in its context, has nothing at all to do with scrolls or books. The Mormons have committed an egregious violation of the rules of interpretation and have led millions of people astray because of it.

Any interpretation of a difficult passage must align with what we know to be true in the passage's immediate context and the rest of the Bible. Using an obscure passage out of context in order to create a new doctrine is wrong. God is not pleased when people get creative with His Word and use it to back their own teachings.

RESOURCE: Display resource 9 as a review of the rules of Bible interpretation.

MAKING IT PERSONAL

Careful Study Habits

ASK: Do your Bible study habits make you prone to misinterpreting Scripture? Explain. (Q16)

ASK: What might you do to make your study more careful? (Q17)

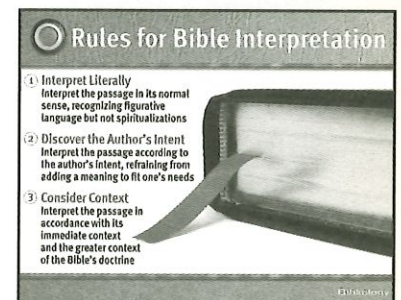
Help your learners see that a careful study of God's Word leads to being deeply impacted by it. God uses the process to make His Word come alive.

A Careful Church

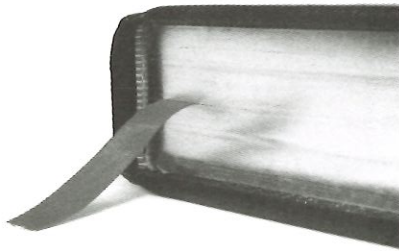
ASK: What might your church do to foster careful study of God's Word? (Q18) *Model careful study of God's Word from the pulpit; use teaching materials that reflect careful study of God's Word; train Sunday School teachers and Bible study leaders on how to study the Word with care.*

ASK: How might you express your gratitude to your pastor for being a careful interpreter of God's Word? (Q19)

Spend time in prayer for your church leadership, asking God to help them be particularly careful in their study of God's Word.



The Powerful Sword



Topic

Power of God's Word

Theme

God's Word is a powerful discerner and defender.

Desired Learner Response

The learner will take steps to unleash the power of God's Word in his life.

Materials

- Resource 10
- Visual 5

Scripture Focus

Matt. 4:1–11; Rom. 1:16–31; 12:1, 2; Eph. 4:21; 6:10–17

Summary

This lesson examines the power of God's Word as the discerner of our hearts and as our defender in spiritual battles. The learner is encouraged to unleash the power of God's Word in his life.

Outline

I. The Power of God for Salvation

- A. Man's powerlessness
- B. The Word's powerfulness

II. The Power of God for Sanctification

- A. The Word as discerner
- B. The Word as defender
 - 1. Jesus' pattern
 - 2. The Spirit's precision

Memory Verse

*"With my whole heart have I sought thee:
O let me not wander from thy commandments.
Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee"*
(Psalm 119:10, 11).