

How to Interpret the Bible

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Many people say, "There are so many different interpretations of the Bible that no one can possibly understand it." The truth is there is only one true interpretation of the Bible and anyone can understand it. The purpose of this study is to give some guidelines on how to arrive at the correct interpretation.

Preparing Ourselves to Interpret the Bible

We must seek to know the truth.

Matt 7:7-"Seek and you shall find." The hunger to find truth is a key to understanding the Bible. In John 7:16-17, Jesus said that if anyone was willing to do God's will, he would understand Jesus' teaching. Our own willingness to obey God's will is essential in finding the truth.

We must remove our own pre-conceived ideas.

Jesus told the Sadducees in Matt. 22:29 that they didn't believe in the resurrection because of 2 things: They did not understand the Scriptures, or the power of God. What we believe about the power of God influences how we interpret Scripture. We must read the Bible with open minds, without our own pre-conceived ideas of what it says.

The Holy Spirit within us shows us the truth.

The Holy Spirit inspired the Bible (2 Tim 3:16, 2 Pet 1:21) and He is the one who helps us understand it. It is the anointing of the Holy Spirit that teaches us the truth (1 John 2:27, John 14:26, 16:13). (Also see 1 Cor 2:10-16). Luke 24:31-32, 45—They couldn't understand the Scriptures until Jesus opened their eyes to understand.

Principles of Interpretation

Look at the background of the original readers.

Most Bible commentaries can give you this information. For example, Paul writes 1 Corinthians to answer a letter he had received from them. He says in 1 Cor. 7:1, "Now concerning the things about which you wrote..." Paul uses the phrase, "now concerning" in 1 Cor. 7:25, 8:1, 12:1, 16:1, all in answer to their questions. It is helpful to understand the purpose for the original readers, which will help us understand how the Scriptures apply to us.

There is only one interpretation of Scripture.

"But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is of one's own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God." (2 Pet 1:20-21) This means that we can't conjure up our own interpretation, but we must seek what the Holy Spirit intended when He wrote the verse. When we come to understand that there is only one true interpretation, this gives us a solid foundation to stand on.

If I wrote you a letter, I would not want you to read between the lines your own interpretation. I would want you to understand the exact meaning that I was trying to convey. The same is true with God's Word. While there is only one true interpretation, there are many applications. We must first seek the meaning of the verse, and then we can apply that verse to our lives in a number of different ways.

Interpret Scripture with Scripture.

The Bible is the best commentary on the Bible. The Bible is a unit that does not contradict itself (Heb 6:18, Titus 1:2, 2 Tim 2:13). Some people say that Jonah was not a real person and that his story is fiction. But Jesus said that Jonah was a real person who spent 3 days and nights inside a whale, which was a sign of Him being in the grave for 3 days and nights. (Matt. 12:40)

Adam and Eve were the first people on earth, and the Bible refers to them in a several passages of

Scripture (Luke 3:38, 1 Cor 11:8-9,15:21-22,45, Rom 5:12-19, Acts 17:26, 1 Tim 2:13-15) By comparing Scripture with Scripture, it will answer a lot of our questions.

Interpret Scriptures in context.

Study the whole Bible as a book and not just isolated verses. Some people use the "Snatch and Patch" method of interpreting Scripture—they snatch a verse here and another verse there, and patch them together to form a quilt theology. You wouldn't go to the library and check out *War and Peace*, read chapters 3 and 7 and 2 paragraphs in chapter 9 and say, "I understand the book." You can't do it with the Bible either. Some people pick their favorite verses and form a theology around them. You can make the Bible say anything you want out of context. Out of context, the Bible says, "There is no God." In context, Psalm 14:1 says, "The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God.'"

Interpret Scriptures literally whenever possible.

The Bible is a literal book inspired by a literal God. There are times when symbolic language is used, but there is always a literal meaning behind the symbolism. Symbolism is used to make things clearer, not less clear.

In Daniel 2, Nebuchadnezzar's Dream Image was a symbolic representation of literal kingdoms that would dominate the earth. The symbolism gave a description of the kingdoms. In Daniel 7, the four beasts were also symbolic of literal kingdoms. Another example is Rev 11:8, where the 2 witnesses lie in the streets of the city which is spiritually called Sodom and Egypt—but then it goes on to explain that the city was Jerusalem, where Jesus was crucified.

Interpret Scripture for what it says, not what you think it says.

Many people assume a verse says something that it really doesn't say. The Bible doesn't say, "Money is the root of all evil" but "the love of money is the root of all the evils" (1 Tim 6:10)

The Bible doesn't say "The devil comes only to steal, and kill, and destroy," but "the thief comes only to steal, and kill and destroy" (John 10:10). In context, v.1 says that he who tries to climb into the fold some other way is a thief and a robber. John 10:1-13 deals with false teachers and false shepherds, which is the one true interpretation. This verse can also apply to the devil, which is one of the many applications.

In John 21:22-23, the disciples thought that Jesus said that John would never die, but He didn't say that. Do you see the difference between what you **think** it says, versus what it **actually** says?

Don't seek hidden meanings.

A professor in seminary once told our class, "Don't seek hidden meanings because you are going to find them." In theology, "exegesis" is taking out of the verse what is in the verse. On the other hand, we can read into a verse what is not there. "Hidden meanings" and "deeper truths" are sometimes deeper lies.

Admittedly there are some verses that are harder to understand than others. Even the apostle Peter said some things were "hard to understand." (2 Pet. 3:16). If there are numerous verses speaking clearly about a certain subject but another verse is unclear, interpret the unclear in light of clear. In other words, make your interpretation based on the majority of clear verses on the subject, rather than the one verse that is difficult to understand.

Beware of man-made doctrines and fabricated traditions.

Much has been added to and taken away from the Scriptures because of man-made doctrines. The Bible warns us about adding and taking away (Rev 22:18-19). Jesus told the Pharisees they worshipped and taught in vain because of their traditions (Matt 15:6,9). Beware of those who twist, add to, or take away from God's Word.