

How to Interpret the Bible

A Bible Study Course for Adults

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How to Interpret the Bible

Lesson One

Foundations for Interpreting Scripture

The foundation of faith

The foundation of keeping Christ at the heart of Scripture

The foundation of faith in the inspiration of Scripture

The foundation of believing that the Bible means what it says

Worship

God wants nothing more than for us to trust in him as his dear children. As you read the following passages, focus on this truth.

A: Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you! See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands. (Isaiah 49:15,16)

B: Here I am! . . . If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me. (Revelation 3:20)

A: But these [words] are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. (John 20:31)

B: If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. (John 14:23)

Prayer: Dear Lord Jesus, as we begin this new course on how to interpret the Bible, open our hearts and minds to know why you have given us your Word. Remind us that each time you speak to us through your Word, you draw us to yourself and invite us to trust in you. Help us learn to interpret your Word according to your will. Amen.

Introduction

John threw his hands up in frustration. “The Bible experts can’t agree on what this passage means,” he bemoaned. “How can I ever figure it out?”

Have you ever felt this way?

Joan was in the middle of her early-morning Bible reading time. She had read about ten passages. All of them fit together in her mind. She was fairly certain she understood their basic meaning. Joan had

been refreshed with the gospel and had taken to heart a point Jesus was teaching his disciples. But then she read a passage that made absolutely no sense to her; she could not understand how it fit into the flow of thought. She skipped the passage and kept reading. But she felt a bit of frustration. How she would have liked to have that passage fit in with the rest of her reading!

Have you ever felt this way?

The purpose of this course is to help you learn some skills of Bible interpretation. You may always encounter “speed bumps,” or hard to understand passages, as you read God’s Word. But learning from Scripture how God wants his Word to be understood will help you read with greater understanding and confidence.

Studying God’s Word

The foundation of faith

Presuppositions play a big role in Bible interpretation. The foundations on which we build will largely determine how solid our building is. In this lesson we will look at some of the foundations Scripture lays for us as we seek to interpret the Bible.

Read John 3:16.

Can an unbeliever interpret and understand these words?

Read 1 Corinthians 2:14.

1. What does Paul say about an unbeliever’s ability to understand God’s Word?
2. Compare both of your answers so far. How can we say that unbelievers can understand God’s Word and then say that they cannot understand God’s Word?
3. Agree or disagree: Unbelievers can interpret God’s Word just as well as Christians.

Both unbelievers and believers can interpret God’s Word if they read Scripture in an honest way using God’s gift of reason. However, because unbelievers don’t truly understand the message of the cross and believe it, they will have trouble understanding much of Scripture. Their sinful nature rebels against the message of Christ, and unless the Holy Spirit works faith in their hearts, they will misinterpret Scripture’s clear words.

The foundation of keeping Christ at the heart of Scripture

How Christians view the importance of Jesus Christ will largely influence how they interpret Scripture.

Read John 20:31.

1. Why did God give us his Word?
2. Dave loves to read his Bible. In it he finds everything he needs to live by. The Old Testament commandments give him guidance for life. Jesus' words about love help Dave in his relationships. The epistles present many fine rules to live by. But Dave has missed the heart of Scripture, Christ. How might this lead to faulty interpretations?

The person who knows that Christ is the heart of Scripture will not misinterpret the many passages that speak about salvation through him.

The foundation of faith in the inspiration of Scripture

How people view the source and nature of Scripture will largely determine how they interpret it.

Read 2 Timothy 3:14-17.

1. What are some of the uses of Scripture?
2. While taking a required college course in ancient literature, Julie had learned that the Bible is like any other great book, a creation of human genius. She respects the Bible as such. However, she is unwilling to let it determine her course of action, particularly because she wants to divorce her husband. Julie wonders why she should be corrected by someone who lived many years ago in a different culture. She interprets many of the Bible's statements as outmoded thoughts of an ancient culture. How do Julie's preconceptions influence how she interprets Scripture?
3. Why will Christians want to be serious and honest about how they interpret Scripture?

Read John 10:34-37.

Consider the words *and the Scripture cannot be broken*. What is Jesus saying about the truthfulness of Scripture?

If interpreters believe God wrote the Bible and everything in it is true, they will want to avoid any interpretation that misrepresents what the Bible says.

The foundation of believing that the Bible means what it says

Who would argue with the title of this section? The fact is, though, that many people don't believe that the Bible means what it says.

For example, when Martin Luther was training to become a priest in the Catholic church, his teachers interpreted the Scripture using the allegorical method—all verses of Scripture contain symbolic meanings. Verses could be made to say just about anything the interpreter wanted them to say.

Scripture itself teaches us to look for the single, fundamental meaning of a passage.

Read Matthew 2:3-6.

When the Jewish leaders wanted to know where Christ was to be born, they turned to the prophet Micah and found the answer. Compare their way of handling Scripture with the way Luther's teachers handled it.

Read Acts 2:24-33.

How does Peter approach Scripture in these verses?

Read Romans 6:8.

How does Paul interpret David's words?

Read John 6:30-33.

How did both Jesus and the Pharisees interpret Moses' account of the miracle of the manna?

Scripture says what it means. The author wrote down exactly what he intended to say. Bible interpretation is nothing more than honestly describing, in other terms, the simple, basic meaning of what the text says.

Summary

How we interpret Scripture is influenced by our presuppositions. An unbeliever can interpret what Scripture says. The words of Scripture are clear, and they mean what they say. These words can lead an unbeliever to faith.

In practice, however, a Christian will be able to offer a more solid interpretation. Christians know that Christ is at the heart of Scripture. They believe that every word in Scripture comes from God himself, so they are careful about how they interpret it. Because Christians consider Christ their greatest treasure, they are willing to spend the necessary time to study Scripture carefully so their interpretation is well thought out. Christians will approach Scripture with the humble faith that it says what it means.

In the following lessons, we will consider three principles that will help us interpret Scripture faithfully.

- Scripture interprets Scripture.
- We must pay careful attention to the grammar of Scripture.
- We must carefully consider the historical setting of Scripture—letting Scripture itself describe that setting.

During the week

Read *Biblical Interpretation: The Only Right Way*, by David Kuske, pages 27-47.

Consider reading Professor Kuske's entire book during the duration of this course. Reread the listed pages in the "During the week" section to review the lesson you just studied.

How to Interpret the Bible

Lesson Two

Let Scripture Interpret Scripture

Use the immediate context

Use the wider context

Let clearer passages determine the meaning of more difficult ones

Worship

Read Psalm 119:97-104 responsively.

A: Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long.

B: Your commands make me wiser than my enemies, for they are ever with me.

A: I have more insight than all my teachers, for I meditate on your statutes.

B: I have more understanding than the elders, for I obey your precepts.

A: I have kept my feet from every evil path so that I might obey your word.

B: I have not departed from your laws, for you yourself have taught me.

A: How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!

B: I gain understanding from your precepts; therefore I hate every wrong path.

Prayer: Dear Lord, you have given us your Word. Now help us interpret it in a God-pleasing way. In a world where there are so many different and conflicting interpretations, give us insights from your Word about how you want us to approach it and interpret it. Amen.

Introduction

Imagine that you are on a deserted island. You have enough food and shelter and clothing, but you have nothing else—except your Bible. You have no commentaries, no Bible dictionaries, and no one to teach you what the Bible means. Would you be able to interpret the Bible accurately?

Studying God's Word

Use the immediate context

Many of the rules of interpretation found in the following pages are not derived from a Scripture passage. They are simply commonsense rules of interpretation, which apply to any book. Therefore, you will not always find a section of Scripture quoted to back up the point being made.

The first rule of Scripture is one that you instinctively follow as you read a Sunday newspaper or best-selling novel. You let the context determine the meaning of the passage.

Use the immediate context—the verses immediately before and after the verse you are thinking about—to help you determine the meaning of a passage.

Read John 3:16.

What is the meaning of *the world* in this verse? How does the context help you interpret those words?

Read 1 John 2:15.

What is the meaning of *the world* in this verse? How does the context help you interpret those words?

Most Scripture passages can be interpreted simply by observing the immediate context.

Use the wider context

Sometimes only the wider context of Scripture will help you discover the meaning of a verse. The wider context might include other sections of the book you are reading, other writings by the same author, or the Bible as a whole.

Read John 21:15.

The setting is in Galilee after Jesus' resurrection. The disciples were in their boats fishing. They had caught nothing. Jesus told them to cast their nets on the right side of the boat, and they caught many fish. The disciples and Jesus had just finished eating breakfast. Jesus asked Peter if he loved Jesus "more than these."

1. What might the word *these* refer to in the immediate context?
2. Read John 13:37,38; Matthew 26:33. What is a better interpretation of the word *these* in light of these passages?

3. In the light of this discussion, why can we say that regular Bible reading and studying help us grow in our ability to interpret Scripture?

Many Scripture passages can be interpreted using the immediate context; however, many can be interpreted only using the wider context of Scripture. The better we know the wider context, the better we will be able to interpret Scripture.

Let clearer passages determine the meaning of more difficult ones

Some passages seem difficult or obscure. When you come across such a passage, be patient. Seek out other passages in Scripture that clarify the one you are having difficulty with.

Read Matthew 7:1.

Many want to use this passage to escape being labeled as sinners.

1. True or false: In Matthew 7:1 Jesus tells us that under no circumstances should we ever judge anyone else's actions or motives. Before you answer this question, work through the following questions and use the context of Scripture to help you interpret this verse.
2. Read verse 2, the immediate context. What does it tell you?
3. Read verses 15 and 16, the wider context of the chapter. What light do these verses shed on our question?
4. Read 1 Corinthians 5:1-5, the wider context of Scripture. What light do these verses shed on our question?
5. Answer the question we started with. What is the meaning of Matthew 7:1?

Read Romans 8:29,30.

Paul refers to God's foreknowing us and electing us to come to faith. These verses have been difficult for many to interpret. How does Ephesians 1:3-6; 11-14 help us interpret Romans 8:29,30?

Read 2 Peter 3:16.

1. How does this verse encourage us to search patiently the whole context of Scripture in order to understand difficult passages?

2. Sometimes Christians may differ in their judgment on what a passage means. In some cases there is room for such differences of opinion. However all opinions must pass certain tests:
 - They must never confuse law and gospel.
 - They must be based on a completely logical understanding of the text.
 - They must never contradict any statement of Scripture.
 - The reasons for the interpretation must come from Scripture itself.
 - The interpretation must say nothing other than what Scripture says in other places.

In the case of difficult passages, we must always let clearer and more thorough treatments of the topic help us interpret them in a God-pleasing way.

Summary

When you study Scripture, allow Scripture to interpret itself. Pay special attention to the immediate context of the verse under study. But realize that the verse may best be understood in the light of other passages of Scripture. In the case of passages that don't readily reveal their meaning, proceed patiently. Grow in a knowledge of God's Word; rule out wrong interpretations that go against clear teachings of Scripture; discover other portions of Scripture that may offer clues.

During the week

Read *Biblical Interpretation: The Only Right Way*, by David Kuske, pages 113-137.

How to Interpret the Bible

Lesson Three

Look Carefully at the Words

Look carefully at the meanings of words and how they are used

Look carefully at the kind of writing the author is using

Worship

Read Psalm 19:7-9 responsively.

A: The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul.

B: The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple.

A: The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart.

B: The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes.

A: The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever.

B: The ordinances of the LORD are sure and altogether righteous.

Prayer: Dear Lord, we come to you as simple people, simple in the sense that by nature we cannot understand your great plans for the world and for us. Yet you have revealed them to us in your Word. You have made wise our simple minds and led us to know about our Savior and grow in faith. We come before you today with minds that are open to your Word. Help us approach your Word with God-pleasing methods of interpretation and receive all the insight you want us to have. Amen.

Introduction

Think again of how you read a newspaper. If you read a story about how your state legislature is acting on a bill to improve the highway near your home, how are you going to interpret the story? Or if you read, "The stock market has gone up 50 points," how will you handle the individual words in that sentence?

In many ways interpreting the Bible is very simple. If we read the Bible as we instinctively read the newspaper, we will understand the Bible as God intends it to be understood. In this and the next lesson, we will be looking at how the Bible writers use words. We call this the *grammatical setting* of Scripture.

This lesson is really only an extension of what we learned last week. We let Scripture interpret Scripture. The context of Scripture itself will help us understand how we are to interpret its words.

Studying God's Word

Look carefully at the meanings of words and how they are used

The Bible was not written in an unintelligible code to be deciphered by some magical formula. Those who read the Bible do not need to read into, beyond, or between words for some “deeper” or other-than-normal meaning.

For example, a journalist travels to India and writes a news report about a terrible famine that is afflicting the country. When people read his article back home, he wants them to interpret his words to mean (choose one):

1. that the people of India are experiencing a great intellectual hunger.
2. that the people of India have good appetites.
3. that the writer is predicting a famine sometime in India's future.
4. that the people's souls in India desperately need the gospel of Christ.
5. that the people of India are physically hungry due to a lack of food supply in the country.

How can you be sure of your interpretation?

We must take care to understand the meanings of the words Scripture uses. The work of interpreting the Greek words in the original text into English falls largely into the laps of translators. Those using a translation should be sure they are using a faithful translation, one that conveys the original words and sentences clearly and accurately.

As you read your English Bible, be sure you understand every word. As with any reading, if you don't understand a word, it will be difficult to interpret the section. Consult a dictionary if you need help.

There are times, however, when a word may have several meanings and you must choose which one is correct. We already looked at one instance where the word *world* carries two different meanings.

Read Matthew 1:19, Luke 1:6, and Galatians 3:11.

1. The word *righteous* (translated *upright* in Luke 1) has two different meanings in these verses. What are they?
2. How does the context help you understand how the word is used?

Read Luke 15:32.

The word *dead* is obviously not used here in the sense of physical death. How do we know?

In order to be sure you understand clearly how Luke uses this word, you decide to use a concordance. When you look up the word *death*, you find these passages. Which of them speak of physical death? In which of them is the context similar to that in the story of the prodigal son?

1. Matthew 28:7—He has risen from the dead.
2. Romans 6:23—The wages of sin is death.
3. Romans 8:10—Your body is dead because of sin.
4. Ephesians 2:1—You were dead in your transgressions.
5. Thessalonians 4:16—And the dead in Christ will rise first.

Look carefully at the words the Bible writers use. Let the context help you arrive at the correct meaning. Examine how the word is used in the wider context of Scripture.

Look carefully at the kind of writing the author is using

The interpreter of Scripture must always be aware of the kind of writing the Bible writer is using. Again, this is nothing different than we do every day when we read nonbiblical writing. We are sensitive to whether we are reading a prose narrative or poetry or a story that looks like narrative but which the author has made up to illustrate some truth.

Below is a list of the main kinds (the technical term is *genre*) of literature we find in Scripture. The descriptions are taken from *Biblical Interpretation: The Only Right Way*, by David Kuske, pages 83 and 84.

Narrative is the statement of historical data. The reader is given a report of such things as what took place, at what time, who was involved, where, and why.

1. Locate some sections of narrative.
2. Why is it important to know that a certain section of Scripture is narrative?

Poetry is characterized by several kinds of parallelism. The second part of a line (or second line) will explain, expand on, or contrast with the first part of the line (or the preceding line).

1. Locate some sections of poetry.
2. Why is it important to know that a certain section of Scripture is written as poetry?

Epistles are letters written to churches or individuals. They have a distinct structure (as in letters we write). They also have a distinct historical context, which must be taken into account. (More about the historical setting in lesson five.)

1. Locate some epistles.
2. Why is it important to be able to recognize epistles?

Prophecy-teaching is a general term for the declaration and explanation of spiritual truths. Bible writers convict people of sin, declare God's plan of salvation in Christ, and urge their readers to embrace and cling to the grace of God by faith.

1. Locate some examples of prophecy-teaching.
2. Why is it important to know that a certain section of Scripture is prophecy-teaching?

Apocalypse is characterized by fantastic imagery. Often, as in much of Revelation, entire chapters comprise a vision made up of symbols.

1. Locate some examples of apocalypse.

2. Why is it important to know that a certain section of Scripture is apocalypse?

Look carefully at the kind of literature you are reading. Most often the context will help you decide.

Summary

Be sure you know what words mean; use your dictionary when you don't. Let the context of Scripture help you discover the meaning of words that can carry more than one meaning. When you interpret, be sensitive to the kind of literature you are reading.

During the week

Read *Biblical Interpretation: The Only Right Way*, by David Kuske, pages 76-87.

How to Interpret the Bible

Lesson Four

Interpreting Figurative Language

Interpreting short figures of speech

Interpreting parables

Interpreting symbols

Worship

Read Psalm 119:105-112 responsively.

A: Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.

B: I have taken an oath and confirmed it, that I will follow your righteous laws.

A: I have suffered much; preserve my life, O LORD, according to your word.

B: Accept, O LORD, the willing praise of my mouth, and teach me your laws.

A: Though I constantly take my life in my hands, I will not forget your law.

B: The wicked have set a snare for me, but I have not strayed from your precepts.

A: Your statutes are my heritage forever; they are the joy of my heart.

B: My heart is set on keeping your decrees to the very end.

Prayer: Dear Lord Jesus, your Word has been read, studied, and loved by Christians throughout the ages. Give us a love for your Word that sees it as the one thing we need. May we keep your Word ever before our eyes so it truly becomes a lamp to our feet and a light for our paths. In your name we pray. Amen.

Introduction

The Bible is overflowing with figurative language. To this day the people of the Middle East frequently speak, write, and think figuratively. They love to draw pictures in the reader's mind.

Look at the first verse in the responsive reading above. Did you have any trouble interpreting the figure of speech David used? What was the advantage of using a figure of speech in that verse?

Bible writers use many different kinds of figurative language. All of them are related and share this common characteristic: they use something *known* to explain something *unknown*.

In this lesson we will explore some ways that Scripture uses figurative language.

Studying God's Word

Interpreting short figures of speech

We use short figures of speech often in our day-to-day conversations. Most of the time it is easy to pick them out. Work through the following exercise. This exercise illustrates why it is important to recognize when a writer is using a word in a figurative way. What do the italicized words mean in the passages below?

- **Genesis 1:5** There was evening, and there was morning—the first *day*.

- **Psalm 18:2** The LORD is my *rock*.

- **2 Kings 2:11** Elijah went up to heaven *in a whirlwind*.

- **Philippians 3:2** Watch out for those *dogs*.

- **James 3:6** The tongue also is a *fire*.

- **Jonah 1:17** Jonah was *inside the fish*.

- **Matthew 26:26,28** *This is my body. This is my blood.*

How can you tell if the author is using a figure of speech? Here are three principles to consider:

1. Always take a text literally unless you are forced to do otherwise.
2. Take the words figuratively if the author indicates that he wants them to be understood that way. See Luke 10:3 and Matthew 13:24 for examples.

3. Take the words figuratively if the context indicates that they are to be understood that way. See John 15:5 and Matthew 5:13 for examples.

Below is a list of figures of speech followed by examples. Try to match the figure to the right example by putting the corresponding number in the blank.

- _____ Simile: a comparison introduced by the words *like* or *as*.
- _____ Metaphor: a comparison that does not use *like* or *as* to give away the comparison.
- _____ Personification: human characteristics applied to something inanimate.
- _____ Hyperbole: exaggeration for effect, not meant to be taken literally.
- _____ Rhetorical question: a question that does not seek an answer; rather, it emphasizes a truth.
- _____ Irony: the speaker or writer says the very opposite of what he or she intends to convey.
- _____ Metonymy: a word or expression is used in place of another to portray some actual relationship between the things signified.
- _____ Synecdoche: substituting a part of something for the whole or the whole for the part.

1. “Their feet rush into sin” (Proverbs 1:16). Actually it wasn’t just their feet but their whole bodies.
2. “How was the exam?” A student answers, “Simple! Simple!” Yet the tone of his voice indicates that he really means the exam was difficult.
3. “My people have been lost sheep” (Jeremiah 50:6).
4. “All night long I flood my bed with weeping and drench my couch with tears” (Psalm 6:6).
5. “All men are like grass” (1 Peter 1:24).
6. “If God is for us, who can be against us?” (Romans 8:31).
7. “The White House today reported . . . ,” when actually the president or one of his aides reported.
8. “The mountains and hills will burst into song” (Isaiah 55:12).

Now interpret the following passages:

- Psalm 119:105 metaphor _____
- Micah 4:3 synecdoche _____
- Matt 6:34 personification _____
- Luke 16:29 metonymy _____
- Luke 17:24 simile _____
- John 21:25 hyperbole _____
- 1 Corinthians 4:8 irony _____

Bible writers use figurative language. As in normal writing, the context will indicate whether we are to interpret something literally or figuratively.

Interpreting parables

The word *parable* comes from the Greek *para* (“beside or alongside”) and *ballein* (“to throw”). A parable is a story that is thrown alongside the truth to illustrate the truth.

A parable is only an extended simile. When you run into a parable, keep the following thoughts in mind:

1. Jesus told parables to illustrate a single truth. The main goal for the interpreter is to find that truth. Use the context to help you determine what it is.
2. Be careful about overinterpretation. Sometimes many details help us understand the main truth. Sometimes only a few do. Sometimes all that can be interpreted is the parable's main truth.

Practice finding the main truth in the following parables. Then ask which details can be interpreted and which should not be.

- Matthew 13:1-9,18-23—The parable of the sower and the seed.

- Matthew 21:33-39—The parable of the tenants.

- Luke 16:1-13—The parable of the shrewd manager.

When you interpret parables, first discover the main point Jesus is making. Then interpret only those details that support the main point.

Interpreting symbols

A symbol is an item used as a reminder of something important. The best example of a symbol is a cross. What symbol did God establish in Genesis 9:12-17?

We are familiar with the symbolical language of Revelation. Daniel and Ezekiel also use many symbols.

Read Revelation 1:20. Also refer to 1:12-16.

What are the two symbols Jesus interprets in this verse? What do they symbolize?

Scripture is filled with symbols, or pictures, that remind us of something. Most often we can find the meaning of symbols from the wider context of Scripture.

Summary

Scripture is filled with figurative language. From short figures of speech to parables to symbols, the Holy Spirit uses the human language to bring a variety of pictures and emotions into our minds. We need to be careful when we interpret these figures of speech. We should always look for the main point of comparison and be careful not to overinterpret, especially in the case of parables.

During the week

Read *Biblical Interpretation: The Only Right Way*, by David Kuske, pages 86-104.

How to Interpret the Bible

Lesson Five

Scripture is a Historical Book

Why the interpreter must view Scripture in its historical context

Grow to be able to interpret Scripture historically

The place of secular background material in Scripture interpretation

Worship

Read Psalm 105 responsively, selected verses.

A: Give thanks to the LORD, call on his name;

B: Make known among the nations what he has done.

A: Sing to him, sing praise to him;

B: Tell of all his wonderful acts.

A: Glory in his holy name;

B: Let the hearts of those who seek the LORD rejoice.

A: Remember the wonders he has done,

B: His miracles, and the judgments he pronounced.

A: When they were but few in number,

B: They wandered from nation to nation, from one kingdom to another.

A: He allowed no one to oppress them;

B: For their sake he rebuked kings:

A: “Do not touch my anointed ones;

B: Do my prophets no harm.”

Prayer: Dear Lord, thank you for giving us your Word. We confess our sins—the many times we have neglected reading your Word and the many times we have failed to give it the careful attention and study it deserves. Thank you for continuing to give us your Holy Spirit, who has drawn us here today to learn more about Bible interpretation. May the truths we learn in this lesson give us additional tools to use to your glory and our good. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

Introduction

Confessional Lutherans let Scripture interpret Scripture. We follow what is called the historical-grammatical method of interpreting Scripture.

In the last two lessons, you have learned what it means to view Scripture as a grammatical book, a book of words and sentences and various kinds of literature. Understanding how the authors used these elements makes us more skillful interpreters.

Today we learn about the historical side of Scripture interpretation. Understanding the history of Scripture will also make us more skillful interpreters.

Studying God's Word

Why the interpreter must view Scripture in its historical context

Every historical document was originally written to a certain reader or readers who were living in certain places and at certain periods in history.

Here is an example of understanding the historical setting of a statement:

1. A man by the name of Patrick Henry once said, "Give me liberty or give me death." What did Patrick Henry mean by *liberty*?
 - release from jail
 - the Statue of Liberty
 - financial freedom
 - freedom from slavery
 - political freedom from the tyranny of other governments

How did you arrive at your answer?

A humorous story illustrates how one person completely disregarded the historical context of Scripture.

A Christian was in need of some direction in his life. The best way to do this, he thought, was to let the Lord guide him through Scripture. He decided to open the Bible at random, place his finger on a passage, and follow the advice.

He opened his Bible and the first passage he laid his finger on was Matthew 27:5, "Then [Judas] went away and hanged himself."

"That can't be right," he thought to himself, "I'd better try again." So he opened his Bible at random and read the passage his finger came to rest on, Luke 10:37, "Jesus told him, 'Go and do likewise.'"

1. What error of interpretation might have led to a tragedy?

2. Think back to the basic principle of interpreting Scripture: Let Scripture interpret Scripture. How did this man fail to do this?

Below are a number of examples to illustrate the principle we are studying.

Read John 10:16.

1. What did Jesus mean by other sheep?

- the Old Testament Israelites in the wilderness
- a flock of sheep on a six-acre ranch Jesus owned just outside of Capernaum
- people of the Western Hemisphere
- people in heaven
- all those outside of Judaism—Gentiles

How did you arrive at your answer?

Read Deuteronomy 15:1.

How does the historical context of Scripture help us interpret this passage?

Read Deuteronomy 14:22.

How does the historical context of Scripture help us interpret this passage?

Read Exodus 20:8-11 and Colossians 2:16,17.

1. How does the historical context of Scripture help us interpret the Exodus passage?

2. How does Saint Paul interpret the Exodus passage in its historical context?

Read Philippians 1:20-26. Compare this with 2 Timothy 4:6-8.

How does understanding the historical context of Philippians and 2 Timothy help us interpret these verses?

Understanding who is speaking, to whom, where, when, and why will help us interpret and apply Scripture accurately.

Grow to be able to interpret Scripture historically

Scripture itself contains all the history we need to interpret the Bible in its historical context. Therefore, the more we know about Scripture, the better we will be able to interpret it.

In our worship today, we read a portion of Psalm 105. Interpret the following phrases from our reading:

- “tell of all his wonderful acts”
- “when they were but few in number”
- “they wandered”
- “do my prophets no harm”

Discuss how the following kinds of Bible study will help you interpret Scripture:

- A two-year survey course on the whole Bible.
- A study of the book of Acts.
- A study of the Mosaic Law.
- A study of the history of the kings of Israel and Judah.

To interpret the Bible well, it is important to have a good grasp of all Scripture. This helps the interpreter understand what is being said, if it should apply to him or her and how it should be applied.

The place of secular background material in Scripture interpretation

In this course we have been stressing the fact that Scripture interprets Scripture. Is there any room for using information gleaned from secular sources to help us understand Scripture?

Consider the following scenarios:

Your friend Susan came to Bible study last week with an article on ancient farming practices. The class was studying the parable of the sower and the seed.

1. How could the class use this information in their study?

Another friend, John, ran across an interesting article on the city of Jericho. Recent archaeological work there gives us interesting insights into the size and layout of the city. It also uncovers evidence that shows that at one point in history, the walls of Jericho seem to have fallen outward.

2. How might this information be helpful?
3. How might this information be misused?

Material from outside sources, whether it is historical material or material that deals with word usage, can shed light on a passage, but it can never be used to change the simple meaning of the text.

Summary

Scripture's message is timeless. Yet Scripture is a historical book. Knowing who wrote a book, when it was written, to whom certain words were spoken, and why they were spoken will help Bible readers properly interpret a passage and apply its timeless message to themselves.

During the week

Read *Biblical Interpretation: The Only Right Way*, by David Kuske, pages 59-67.

How to Interpret the Bible

Lesson Six

Human Reason: Its Role in Interpreting Scripture

The right way to use reason

The wrong way to use reason

Worship

Read Psalm 27:1,4,5 responsively.

A: The LORD is my light and my salvation—

B: Whom shall I fear?

A: The LORD is the stronghold of my life—

B: Of whom shall I be afraid?

A: One thing I ask of the LORD, this is what I seek:

B: That I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life,

A: To gaze upon the beauty of the LORD

B: And to seek him in his temple.

A: For in the day of trouble

B: He will keep me safe in his dwelling;

A: He will hide me in the shelter of his tabernacle

B: And set me high upon a rock.

Prayer: Dear Lord, help us sit in all humility in your temple gazing at your beauty. May our eyes, ears, minds, and hearts submit themselves to you. You have revealed yourself to us in your Word. May your beauty always shine forth from it. Enable us to interpret your Word in such a way that our views of you are not clouded over by misunderstanding and misapplication. Bless our reasoning powers so that we use them to your glory. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Introduction

Reason is a great gift of God. It is also the source of all doctrinal errors. Martin Luther maintained these two truths side by side. Nowhere does this become more apparent than when interpreting Scripture.

Reason, applied to the words of Scripture, will help us understand what God is teaching us.

Reason, when injecting its own thoughts into Scripture, will invariably pervert Scripture's meaning.

In today's lesson we will examine how we should and should not use reason when we interpret the Bible.

Studying God's Word

The right way to use reason

The following is a summary of what we have studied in this course. How does reason play an important role in doing each?

1. Read Scripture in faith, with a firm trust in the inspiration of Scripture, and keep Christ in the center of your interpretation.
2. Strive to let Scripture interpret Scripture. If you are having difficulty with a section of Scripture, consult other sections of Scripture that speak about the same topic or that contain background material that sheds light on passages you are studying.
3. Unless Scripture itself leads you to do otherwise, interpret words in their simple, literal meaning. Scripture will indicate when it is speaking figuratively. Strive to gain the single fundamental meaning of the section you are reading.
4. Read Scripture in its historical context. Some statements are meant only for certain people at certain times. Analyze whether this applies to the passage at hand; otherwise, consider it spoken to all people of all times.
5. Apply sound rules of logic to your interpretation. In other words, read it with the same simplicity and honesty you use when you read the Sunday newspaper. Ask the Lord to give you his Holy Spirit and bless your efforts to think logically about Scripture.

Reason is a gift of God, which he wants us to use to interpret Scripture. When reason lets Scripture interpret Scripture, it is being used as God intended.

The wrong way to use reason

The following are a series of illustrations of the wrong way reason is often used to interpret Scripture. These examples are representative of arguments used in today's religious world that are having a tremendous impact on the way people view and interpret Scripture.

1. **Scientific evidence points to a world that is billions of years old. It also points to a slow evolutionary development of organic life. Therefore, the creation of the world in Genesis 1 and 2 must be a symbolical description of God working over billions of years through the process of natural selection to bring the world to the state it is in now.**

What rules of proper biblical interpretation are being broken?

- 2. Theological scholars have studied the ancient texts of the Bible and found that various sections in the first five books of Moses each have unique characteristics. They have different emphases, use different words for God, and seem to have been written by different authors. For example, they claim one author wrote one version of the creation account in Genesis 1 and another wrote a second account in Genesis 2. Given this evidence, Scripture probably came about like this: Various ancient authors wrote documents, which were later pieced together by some unknown scholar.**

What rules of proper biblical interpretation are being broken?

- 3. An article in a local newspaper argued that Jesus supported homosexuality. The argument was based on the use of the word *servant* found in Matthew 8:6. According to the article, the word was used in the ancient world to refer to the young lover of an older man. The article claims that this is what it means in Matthew, and, since Jesus did not censure the centurion, he gave tacit approval to his homosexuality.**

What rules of proper biblical interpretation are being broken?

- 4. In Luther's day the "reformed" party refused to believe that Jesus' body and blood were present in the Lord's Supper. That idea did not seem reasonable to them, so they denied it.**

What rules of proper biblical interpretation are being broken?

- 5. Some churches believe that since the Third Commandment says we should keep the Sabbath Day holy, a Christian should worship on Saturday.**

What rules of proper biblical interpretation are being broken?

- 6. Some people in the church would like to erase any role distinctions between men and women. To support their position they quote Galatians 3:28, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." According to this group, this passage proves there are no role distinctions.**

What rules of proper biblical interpretation are being broken?

- 7. Linguists have studied certain words in the book of Joel and compared the use of these words to how they are used in nonbiblical literature. They have discovered that some words Joel used are only found in nonbiblical literature written at a much later date. Therefore,**

Joel must have been written much later—even after many of its prophecies had come to pass.

What rules of proper biblical interpretation are being broken?

8. Your friend has just come home from a Bible study on Revelation 20. “You Lutherans don’t believe what the Bible says. The Bible says Christ will reign for one thousand years and I take the Bible to mean exactly that.”

What rules of proper biblical interpretation are being broken?

1. How do you know when reason has gone beyond its rightful use?

2. Describe in your own words how reason should be used in Scripture interpretation.

Summary

Reason is used improperly when it brings something into the text that is used to obscure the text’s simple, fundamental meaning.

The proper use of reason draws out the meaning of the text by using sound methods of interpretation.

During the week

Read *Biblical Interpretation: The Only Right Way*, by David Kuske, pages 139-244.