

How to Study the Bible

The Purpose of Reading Scripture

"All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work." (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

"Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did. . . .They were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come" (1 Corinthians 10:6, 11).

"Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (Romans 15:4).

The gift and application of scripture

Revelation – "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets..." (Hebrews 1:1)

Inspiration – "All Scripture is inspired by God..." (2 Timothy 3:16)

Illumination - "Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God." (1 Corinthians 2:12)

Interpretation – "...knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man..." (2 Peter 1:20-21)

The need for proper interpretation

Everyone approaches scripture with biases (personal experiences, culture, prior understanding of words and ideas).

The aim of interpretation is not to come up with a novel idea. It is to get at the plain meaning of the text. "Correct interpretation brings relief to the mind as well as a prick to the heart."

The task of interpretation

Exegesis. *Discovering the original, intended meaning of a given text through careful, systematic study. Reaching back to the historical context (culture, author, audience) and finding out the intended meaning.*

1. Read the text carefully.
 - a. follow the author's train of thought
 - b. determine the meaning of the words used
 - c. note any references to other texts

2. Ask the right questions of the text.
 - a. Who is the audience and what is their situation?
 - b. What is the cultural/historical context?
 - c. What is the literary context (genre)?
 - d. Why does the author use the words/phrases he uses (grammar)?

Hermeneutics. The science of interpretation. The means by which the reader determines the meaning of the text.

Hermeneutics follows exegesis because we must always find the original meaning of the text first before applying our own biases/misunderstandings to the text.

Mistake	Passage	Misinterpretation
Interpret one piece of Scripture in a way that contradicts another piece of Scripture.	“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.” (Ephesians 2:8-9) // “You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.” (James 2:24)	<i>“Paul says we are saved by faith, but James says we are saved by works, so they contradict each other.”</i>
Interpret a passage in a way that would not have made sense to the Bible’s original audience.	“In appearance the locusts were like horses prepared for battle: on their heads were what looked like crowns of gold; their faces were like human faces...” (Revelation 9:7)	<i>“The locusts in the book of Revelation are Apache helicopters.”</i>
Interpret a passage without regard to its genre.	“Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it.” (Proverbs 22:6)	<i>“There is no way my child won’t be saved because Proverbs 22:6 is an absolute promise, always.”</i>
Interpret a passage in a way not held by anyone in church history.	“They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.” (Acts 2:4)	<i>“Unless someone speaks in tongues, they cannot be saved.”</i>
Interpret a passage without looking at its context.	“And the pig, because it parts the hoof and is cloven-footed but does not chew the cud, is unclean to you. You shall not eat any of their flesh...” (Leviticus 11:7-8)	<i>“We can’t eat bacon because the Old Testament expressly forbids eating pork.”</i>
Never check your interpretation with others.	“Delight yourself in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart.” (Psalm 37:4)	<i>“God showed me what this passage means, even though nobody else agrees with me.”</i>
Interpret a passage in a way that justifies your own preferences.	“Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more...” (Romans 5:20)	<i>“To experience more grace, I should sin more.”</i>
Build major doctrines/teaching from obscure passages.	“Jabez called upon the God of Israel, saying, ‘Oh that you would bless me and enlarge my border, and that your hand might be with me, and that you would keep me from harm so that it might not bring me pain!’ And God granted what he asked.” (1 Chronicles 4:10)	<i>“I want to teach you a prayer that God ALWAYS answers... I believe it contains the key to a life extraordinary favor with God.” (quote from Prayer of Jabez)</i>
Read your presuppositions onto the text.	“I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet.” (1 Timothy 2:12)	<i>“The idea that men and women are to have different roles and responsibilities is antiquated, chauvinistic and naturally leads to abuse. Therefore, the Bible cannot be saying that to modern-day Christians.”</i>

Commonly misinterpreted verses

“For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.” (Jeremiah 29:11)

“For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.” (Matthew 18:20)

“If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.” (2 Chronicles 7:14)

An Exercise in Study and Interpretation (Colossians 3:1-4)

^{3:1} If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. ³ For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. ⁴ When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

1a	<i>condition</i>	If then
		you have been raised with Christ
b	<i>exhortation</i>	seek the things that are above
c	<i>place</i>	where Christ is
d	<i>description</i>	seated at the right hand of God
2a	<i>exhortation</i>	Set your minds on things that are above
b	<i>contrast</i>	not on things that are on earth
3a	<i>basis</i>	For you have died
b	<i>result</i>	And your life is hidden with Christ in God
4a	<i>time</i>	When Christ...appears
b	<i>apposition</i>	who is your life
c	<i>sequence</i>	then
d	<i>result</i>	you also will appear with him in glory

What is the author intending to say to the audience?

Things to consider:

Why was the book of Colossians written?

Scriptural context (hint, look at the surrounding verses such as 1:27, 2:20-23)

What imagery does the passage evoke?

Recommended Resources

Study Bibles

ESV Study Bible

The Reformation Study Bible

Biblical Studies

How to Read the Bible For All Its Worth, Gordon Fee & Douglas Stuart

Women of the Word: How to Study the Bible with Both Our Hearts and Our Minds, Jen Wilkin

God Centered Biblical Interpretation, Vern S. Poythress

Exegetical Fallacies, Don Carson

The Art of Biblical Narrative, Robert Alter

Reference

Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible

The Pillar New Testament Commentary (commentary series)

Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (commentary series)