

BIBLE INTERPRETATION

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Garland's guide to principles of Bible interpretation, providing a systematic approach to understanding and applying the Scriptures faithfully.

7 Chapters

Table of Contents

1. 01 - Basic Principles of Communication
2. 02 - Understanding the Language of Scripture
3. 03 - The Importance of Context
4. 04 - Understanding the Setting
5. 05 - Special Topics in Bible Interpretation
6. 06 - Applying the Scripture to Life Today
7. 07 - Exercise for Handling a Bible Difficulty

01 - Basic Principles of Communication

Basic Bible Interpretation:

Basic Principles of Communication

Introduction A "Pre-Worldview Course"

- Someone might say, "But I thought this was going to be a worldview course!"
- What determines whether someone has a Biblical worldview?
- When confronted with any issue his first question will be, "What does the Bible say about this?"
- But let's back the question up further: "How can we accurately determine what the Bible does say about various issues?"
- Without a solid foundation for being able to accurately interpret the Scriptures, every person could make the Bible say anything he wants it to say. Obviously, this is not what God wanted when He gave us the Scriptures.
- Therefore, we need to understand and apply the basic principles of Bible interpretation ("hermeneutics" in theological terms). A Bigger Picture
- When we say we want a Biblical worldview, here are some of the issues involved:
 1. How to think and act biblically.
 2. How to accurately interpret the Bible.
 3. How the Bible came to us in language we can understand.
 4. How we view the Bible: its origin, inspiration, inerrancy, and authority.
 5. How we understand the nature and character of God.
- In this workshop we will not be dealing with all of these issues. We will focus on developing sound principles for interpreting what the Bible says. However, there are some "rules" for interpretation that arise from these "big picture" issues:
 1. Work from the assumption that the Bible is God's only inspired, inerrant, and authoritative revelation to us.
 2. Understand that saving faith and the illumination of the indwelling Holy Spirit are required in order to properly interpret God's Word.
 3. Interpret personal experience in light of Scripture, rather than interpreting Scripture in light of personal experience.

4. The Church does not determine what the Bible teaches, the Bible must determine what the Church should teach.
5. Every Christian has the right and responsibility to study and interpret God's Word for himself.

Why Do We Need These Principles?

Write a "Thank You" Note

- Take a moment to write several sentences expressing your thanks to someone for something they have done for you recently.
- Try to give some specific details of the situation, and describe how you felt as a result of their actions. Or share something you learned about yourself or the other person as a result of the situation.

Any Communication Requires Interpretation

- Whenever we use language in order to communicate something, the "rules" of proper interpretation must also be used.
- All thought and language require the stability of categories in order to be effective. If something could be a dog one minute and then transform into a sheep the next, we would never be able to talk about it.
- In the field of logic, this would be called the Law of Non-Contradiction: "The same attribute cannot at the same time belong and not belong to the same subject and in the same respect." In other words, it is not possible for something to be "A" and "not-A."
- This "stability of categories" is unavoidable because it was built into the fabric of the universe by God. Therefore, the Law of Non-Contradiction must be assumed to be true by anyone who wants to think or say anything meaningful. It is necessary for making any kind of distinction, affirmation, or denial. "If someone were to say, 'There is no such thing as truth, and the Law of Non-Contradiction is meaningless,' he has done two things. First, he has assumed that his view is true as opposed to false, and thus he uses the Law of Non-Contradiction.... Second, he has violated the Law of Non-Contradiction by suggesting that there is no such thing as truth while at the same time and in the same sense insisting that there is such a thing as truth - the truth of his own view." 1
- When applied to language, this means ... "that every word in the sentence 'The line is straight' has a specific meaning. The does not mean any, all, or no. Line does not mean dog, dandelion, or doughnut. Is does not mean is not. Straight does not mean white or anything else. Each word has a definite meaning. In order to have a definite meaning, a word must not only mean something, it must also not mean something."2 When applied to the language of the Bible, this means that every word in every verse has a specific meaning.
- Is it possible to determine what is the valid meaning of a text? Are there multiple valid meanings? If so, are some meanings more valid than others? Can I arrive at the meaning of the text simply by asking, "What does it mean to me? These are questions that we must answer before we can accurately interpret the Bible.

- As in the example of your Thank You note, each word and phrase was intended to have a specific meaning. But who was the determiner of that meaning? It was the author of the text that decided which words to use in order to express a single, specific intended meaning.

- As with any other book, the Bible was written in languages that were intended to communicate specific concepts to the readers. "The desired result is that the hearers or readers will understand in their minds the ideas conveyed from the mind of the speaker or writer. A person can know the mind of a speaker or author only by what he says or writes. Since the Bible is written in human languages, obviously the purpose is to convey truths from God, the ultimate Author, to human beings."³ In studying the Bible, we must arrive as closely as possible to the meaning that God intended to communicate through the inspired words that His servants wrote.

How do we know whether we have determined the true meaning?

- We think carefully, study in a disciplined manner, and follow the best possible principles of interpretation.

- These principles will be the subject of the remaining sessions of this workshop. We will be discussing:

1. Understanding the written language of the Bible.
2. Understanding the history, geography, and culture of the Bible writers.
3. Understanding the literary forms of the Bible, as well as how to interpret special types of language.
4. Understanding the unity of the Scriptures, as well as how to interpret the Bible theologically and systematically.
5. Understanding the principles for proper application of the Scriptures to our lives today.

Why study the principles of interpretation?

- Without learning how to think properly and to accurately interpret the words and phrases of the Bible, we will be in danger of misinterpreting Scripture. The apostle Peter warns against the destruction that comes from distorting the meaning of Scripture (2 Peter 3:14-16). A study of sound principles of biblical interpretation will help us to avoid twisting Scripture to make it say something that it was not intended to say.

- "History shows that erroneous principles have often spoiled the exegetical work of fine men, some of whom are great saints. This should be a warning to us against careless interpretation. There is less excuse for us because we can profit by the lessons of the past."⁴

- "Understanding the Bible is a lifelong process. As you study the Word, you will be asking yourself, What does this mean? Is this view correct? Why or why not? What about this interpretation? Is it valid? As you hear sermons and listen to teachers, you are continually confronted with the question, Is what he is saying about the Bible correct? As you discuss the Bible with others, you will be faced with the question of which of several possible views is more likely the meaning of the passage being considered. Seeking to determine what a passage really means is an intriguing

intellectual and spiritual challenge. And as you share the Word of God, people will be asking you, What does this verse mean? How are we to understand this passage?"⁵ Interpretation as a Step in a Larger Process

OBSERVATION

What does the text say?

INTERPRETATION

What does it mean by what it says?

CORRELATION

How does this fit with the rest of the Bible?

APPLICATION

How does this apply to my life today?

Resource List for General Bible Interpretation Hermeneutics Books 1.Roy Zuck, Basic Bible Interpretation 2.Robertson McQuilkin, Understanding and Applying the Bible 3.Henry Virkler, Hermeneutics: Principles and Process of Biblical Interpretation 4.Bernard Ramm, Protestant Biblical Interpretation 5.John MacArthur, Think Biblically Bible Study Methods 1.Kay Arthur, How to Study Your Bible 2.Tim LaHaye, How to Study the bible for Yourself 3.John MacArthur, How to Study the Bible 4.Gordon Fee & Douglas Stuart, How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth 5.Walter Henrichsen & Gayle Jackson, Studying, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible 6.Woodrow Kroll, How to Understand the Bible 7.Irving Jensen, Enjoy Your Bible

8. Dan McCartney & Charles Clayton, Let the Reader Understand: A Guide to Interpreting and Applying the Bible

Endnotes 1 Norman Geisler & Peter Bocchino, Unshakable Foundations (2001), 24.

2 Gordon Clark, Logic (1985), viii.

3 Roy Zuck, Basic Bible Interpretation (1991), 61.

4 A. Berkeley Mickelsen, Interpreting the Bible (1963), 20.

5 Zuck, 15.

02 - Understanding the Language of Scripture

Basic Bible Interpretation:

Understanding the Language of the Bible Gaps Between Us and the Biblical Writers

- Our goal in Bible interpretation is to come as close as possible to the intended meaning of the biblical author, but we must realize that there are several "gaps" between us and the original writers.

1. Time Gap: there is a time gap of hundreds or thousands of years between us and the original writers of the Scriptures.

2. Distance Gap: there is a gap of hundreds or thousands of miles between us and the foreign countries where the events of the Bible happened.

3. Culture Gap: there is a wide difference between how we live today and how people lived and acted in the societies of the original writers.

4. Language Gap: there is a great difference between the way we speak and write today compared with how people spoke and wrote during the time of the original writers.

- Look at this text and see if you can interpret it:

Do, carodd Duw y byd gymaint nes iddo roi ei unig Fab, er mwyn i bob un sy'n credu ynddo ef beidio â mynd i ddistryw ond cael bywyd tragwyddol.¹

- If you want to know what these words say you can either (1) learn the original language, or (2) ask someone who already knows this language to translate it for you. This is what we also do with the written Scriptures, since they were originally recorded in the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek languages.

Interpret the Bible? Which Bible?

- Since our goal is to come as close as possible to the intended meaning of the biblical author, how can we determine which of the available English Bible versions is a close rendering of the words that the biblical writers actually recorded? Unfortunately the process of translation almost always involves some degree of interpretation, which may introduce distortions of the original author's intended meaning.

- Studies have been done to classify different Bible versions according to how "literally" they render the words of the original biblical authors. "Word-for-word" translations come closest to the original text, but the resulting English may not be very readable. "Concept-for-concept" translations are more readable in English, but they may take some liberties with the original intention of the author. "Paraphrase" translations are very readable in English, but they usually render the original text in modern idioms or slang that often expresses meanings different from

those intended by the original author.

- The following list ranks several different versions of the English Bible according to their translation style (most literal to least literal):

1. American Standard Version (ASV) 2. King James Version (KJV) 3. New King James Version (NKJV) 4. New American Standard Bible (NASB) 5. New American Bible (NAB) 6. Revised Standard Version (RSV) 7. Modern Language Bible (MLB) 8. New International Version (NIV) 9. The Good News Bible (GNB) 10. The New English Bible (NEB) 11. The Jerusalem Bible (JB) 12. The Phillips Modern English Bible 13. Today's English Version (TEV) 14. The Message 15. The Living Bible (LB)

- For the purpose of studying and interpreting the Bible, it is best to select one of the top four English translations that are more literal in their rendering of what the biblical author has recorded.

Interpreting the Language of Scripture The more skilled we become in using and interpreting language of all kinds, the more useful we can be to God and others in every area of life that involves communication. "True language consciousness on the part of the interpreter is essential. To develop this in the original languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek) is very rewarding. But if one cannot study the original languages, then a language awareness in English will help the interpreter to escape many pitfalls and to lay hold of many truths which he might otherwise pass by."² Understanding the Meaning of Words (Lexicology)

- We must remember that a word can only mean one thing at a time. Therefore, when a biblical writer uses a word, we should make every effort to determine that single intended meaning.

- In order to do this, we first need to know the possible range of meanings that the specific word might have. Dictionaries (lexicons) and other word study tools can be very helpful in describing the variety of meanings for particular words. "To say that there is a range of meaning does not mean that one can identify the whole range and then pick the meaning that best suits what he would like the author to have said. No, the author had a very specific meaning in mind. If God the Holy Spirit took the care to inspire the very words, we must be careful to search out the intent of the author in his choice of words."³ · We also must know the factors that affect the meaning of words: o Word Origin (etymology) = what is the original root meaning of the word? Etymology may provide a useful word picture to aid our understanding, but it can also be misleading. Etymology does not tell us as much about the meaning of a word as it does about the history of a word. o Word Usage = the meanings of words are established by their common usage during the time of the writer. o Context = the specific meaning of a word is always determined by its use in a particular context.

- The more skill you have with the original languages of the Bible, the more tools become accessible to study those languages. "It is possible to do a competent word study without a working knowledge of the original languages. However, if the serious student can quickly learn both the Hebrew and Greek alphabets and their standard transliterations into English, he is then equipped to use more concordances, dictionaries, and commentaries."⁴ Understanding the Relationship of Words (Syntax) · We must understand the basic parts of speech and how they function in sentences. o Identifying nouns will help us see the subjects and objects in sentences, and identifying adjectives will show us how these nouns are being described. o Identifying verbs

will show us what action is being expressed in sentences, and identifying adverbs will help us see how this action is occurring. Identifying prepositions and connecting words (conjunctions) will show us how the ideas in the sentences are connected to form a complete thought.

- Connecting words (conjunctions) are often important in understanding the flow of thought in a passage, because they indicate the relationships between the ideas that they link together. Here are several conjunctions and the type of relationships they indicate:

Relationship

Conjunction or Connecting Word(s)

CAUSE / REASON

Because, For this reason, Since, That

COMPARISON

As, Also, Just as, Like, Likewise, More, More than, So as, So also, Too

CONDITIONAL

If

CONTINUATION

And, Either, Neither, Nor, Or

CONTRAST

Although, But, Except, Even though, However, Much more, Nevertheless, Only, Otherwise, Whereas, Yet

EMPHASIS

Indeed, Only

EXPLANATION

For, Now

LOCATION / POSITION

At, In, On, Over, Where, Wherever

PURPOSE / RESULT

For this purpose, In order that, So that, That, Then, Therefore, Thus

TIME

After, As, Before, Now, Then, Until, When, While

- Sentence diagrams can visually show the relationship of the parts of sentences, but they can sometimes be difficult to read. A simplified form of "structuring" is another way to represent a text such as, "I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given you in

Christ Jesus" (1 Corinthians 1:4).

WORD

ANALYSIS

I

Pronoun (Subject). What noun does this stand for? (Paul)

thank

Verb(eucharisteo) = to express gratitude, give thanks, offer a prayer of thanksgiving.

my God

Noun (Object). Literally, "the God of me."

always

Adverb describing the time of the action (whenever Paul was praying).

concerning you

Prepositional phrase (peri) describing the object of Paul's thanks to God (the Corinthian believers).

for the grace of God

Prepositional phrase (epi) describing what it is about them that Paul thanks God for ("On account of the favors which God has bestowed on you").

which was given you

Adjective phrase describing how they received this grace. Literally, "the given-to-you" [grace].

in Christ Jesus

Prepositional phrase (en) describing the sphere in which this grace-gift was given to believers.

How to OBSERVE Things in the Language of the Bible

- Most Bible readers do not see things because they do not know what to look for. We learn what to look for by asking the right questions. Questions bring details to our attention.
- Rudyard Kipling's "Six Honest Serving-Men"

I keep six honest serving-men, they taught me all I knew;

Their names are What and Where and When and How and Why and Who.

1. WHAT? Notice the main actions, objects, or ideas being discussed.
2. WHERE? Notice the places or positions being discussed.
3. WHEN? Notice the time references or the order of events.
4. HOW? Notice the way things happen or the qualities of objects.

5. WHY? Notice the reasons or explanations for the actions or ideas.

6. WHO? Notice the main people that are involved or discussed.

· One question may lead to another question. For example, in a study of John 3:2 you might ask WHEN? and see that Nicodemus came to Jesus at night. So you might ask WHY did he come at night?

Resource List for Interpreting Bible Language General Bible Study Software

1. e-Sword = a free Bible study program that has wonderful tools for determining the meaning of biblical words.

(<<http://www.e-Sword.net>> for free download and updates).

2. Swordsearcher = an inexpensive Bible study program, also with good language tools.

(<http://swordsearcher.com> <swordsearcher.com> for a free evaluation download).

3. Other Bible study software: costly and usually not as easy to use as e-Sword.

Biblical Word Meanings (Ranked by level of skill required and by price - least to greatest) 1.Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words (W. E. Vine) 2.The Complete Word Study New Testament (Spiros Zodhiates) 3.Vincent's New Testament Word Studies (Marvin Vincent) 4.Word Pictures in the New Testament (A. T. Robertson) 5.Word Studies in the Greek New Testament (Kenneth Wuest) 6.Word Meanings in the New Testament (Ralph Earle) 7.Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament (Joseph Thayer) 8.The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon (Brown, Driver, & Briggs) 9.Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament (Harris, Archer, & Waltke) 10.Abridged Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (Kittel & Bromiley) Complete or Exhaustive Concordances

1. Strong's Exhaustive Concordance (KJV); NIV Exhaustive Concordance (NIV); NAS Exhaustive Concordance (NASB); other concordances by Bible version.

2. Englishman's Greek Concordance & Englishman's Hebrew Concordance (George Wigram)

Endnotes

1 This is the text of John 3:16 from Y Beibl Cymraeg Newydd (The New Welsh Bible) by The British and Foreign Bible Society, 2004.

2 A. Berkeley Michelsen, Interpreting the Bible (1963), 114.

3 Robertson McQuilkin, Understanding and Applying the Bible (1992), 110.

4 McQuilkin, 114.

03 - The Importance of Context

Basic Bible Interpretation:

The Importance of Context in Understanding Bible Language What Does the Context Include?

- It is important to understand what is meant by "context" when using it to interpret a passage of Scripture. The context of a passage includes all of the following things:

1. The verses immediately before and after the passage.
2. The paragraph and book in which the passage appears.
3. Other books by this author, as well as the overall message of the entire Bible.
4. The cultural environment of the time when the passage was written.

5. The historical period (dispensation) of "Progressive Revelation" during which the passage was written. The Immediate Context of a Passage

- Context is important because it forces the interpreter to examine the biblical writer's overall flow of thought. The meaning of any passage is nearly always determined, controlled, or limited by what appears immediately beforehand and afterward in the text.

- "By observing what precedes and what follows a passage, the interpreter has greater opportunity to see what the writer was seeking to convey to his original readers. These readers did not plunge into the middle of the letter and seize out a few consecutive sentences. They read carefully the whole document. To treat material fairly the modern interpreter must enter into the total train of thought. No axiom is better known and more frequently disobeyed than the oft quoted: 'A text without a context is just a pre-text.' Faithful adherence to context will create in the interpreter a genuine appreciation for the authority of Scripture."¹ A respect for the authority of Scripture means that we will seek its meaning rather than putting ourselves in authority above Scripture as the determiner of its meaning.

- We all have a tendency to take verses out of context and use them to support points that we think are important. This is called "proof-texting" -- and it is our own attempt to make the Bible say what we want it to say, rather than letting the text of Scripture say what God intended to communicate. "The most common failure in interpretation is to violate this most simple and basic principle: the context must control."² Examples of Interpreting in Context

- Galatians 5:4 -- Does "Falling from grace" mean that a person can lose his salvation? In the context of this passage, the apostle Paul was discussing the legalistic "Circumcision Party" and their attempt to bring the believers under the bondage of the Mosaic Law. He warned these believers that if a person seeks justification by God through human effort in obeying the Law, then he has rejected the way of salvation that God provided through the gracious gift of His Son -- he has departed from the way of grace, or is "fallen from grace."

- 1 Corinthians 7:1 -- "It is good for a man not to touch a woman." Does this mean that there should be no physical contact whatsoever between men and women? In what sense is a man not to "touch" a woman? This passage occurs in the context of the importance of abstaining from sexual immorality (1 Corinthians 5:1-5; 1 Corinthians 6:9-20; 1 Corinthians 7:2, 1 Corinthians 7:9), and that is the sense in which a man is not to touch a woman. It would be wrong to conclude that any man should never touch any woman, but sexual purity should be the goal for every man and woman.

- 2 Thessalonians 2:7 -- "For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains will do so until he is taken out of the way." Who is the one who restrains lawlessness? Unfortunately, the apostle Paul never directly identified the restrainer, but he assumed that the Thessalonians knew (based on his previous teaching: see 2 Thessalonians 2:5, 2 Thessalonians 2:15). Our study of the context of this passage indicates that whoever the restrainer is (1) he must have actively existed from the time of Paul through the period of history until the "man of lawlessness" [Antichrist] will be revealed; (2) he must have the authority to dictate, control, and direct human actions and events; (3) he must be powerful enough to hold back mighty spiritual forces -- even those of Satan himself -- see 2 Thessalonians 2:9; (4) he must be able to hold back lawlessness everywhere at once on a global scale; and (5) he must maintain or uphold the standard of absolute holiness during this time period. The only plausible candidate who meets all of these requirements is God the Holy Spirit (especially through his unique ministry during the Church Age).

- 1 John 3:6-10 -- "No one who abides in Him sins; no one who sins has seen Him or knows Him." Does this mean that, in order to maintain his status as a Christian, a believer must never sin? In the context of the entire book of First John this interpretation would be incorrect, because John clearly states that Christians do sin (see 1 John 1:8, 1 John 1:10; 1 John 2:1; 1 John 5:16), and that believers have a remedy when that occurs (see 1 John 1:9). Therefore, we must seek another interpretation of 1 John 3:6-10 that is more consistent with the context of the entire message of the book.

Understanding the Overall Flow of Thought

- The purpose of the biblical writer will influence the meaning of every passage in the book. Understanding the writer's general purpose will provide a larger context for each specific passage, and this will help to determine the author's intended meaning. We should allow his purpose to control our interpretation. A basic rule is that each passage should be interpreted in light of the overall purpose of the biblical writer.

- An isolated passage cannot be interpreted as if it were disconnected from all of the ideas that come before and afterward. Outlines are very helpful in discerning the overall plan of a book. In order to identify and outline the flow of thought, it is important to look for changes or transitions in the text. The biblical writers normally present their messages in recognizable steps. To understand these steps, we must look at the structure and flow of the larger context. Changes in the text may provide clues to the structure of a writer's thoughts. For example:
 - oThe author may clearly announce a new section as he begins it.
 - oThere may be significant "signposts" in the text. For example, in 1 Corinthians 7:1; 1 Corinthians 7:25; 1 Corinthians 8:1; 1 Corinthians 12:1; and 1 Corinthians 16:1 we see the transition words: "Now concerning."
 - oThere may be a change in

literary form, for example from prose to poetry. oThere may be grammatical changes in person, number, tense, voice, or mood. oThere may be obvious changes in subject matter, logic, or thought patterns. oThe author may use regular repetition. He may compare or contrast things consistently. He may write in sequence from cause to effect (or effect to cause).

· "It is important to seek an understanding of the purpose through direct reading of the book before consulting the opinions of others. But it would be a mistake to make a final decision without consulting what specialists have concluded. If a Bible introduction book, a Bible handbook, and the introduction of the biblical book in one or two commentaries all concur as to what the purpose is, one can proceed with some confidence on that basis as he studies the book. If there is no general agreement among the specialists, it is probably because no particular purpose is altogether clear. In that case, no purpose should be used as a guideline for interpreting a specific passage, except in a general way."³

· A study of the larger context of a Scripture passage usually shows why the author wrote to his readers the way he did. "As we understand the purpose of the original writer, we are deterred from attaching ideas to his writings that are completely foreign to his purpose or development of thought."⁴ Our goal should always be to determine the intended meaning of the biblical author, rather than a meaning we impose on the text.

Scripture Interprets Scripture ·The best commentary on the Bible is the Bible!

· Sometimes parallel passages in other Bible books can shed light on the meaning of a passage which is obscure in its immediate context. When we say that a passage is parallel it may be a direct verbal parallel with similar words and phrases, or it may be a conceptual parallel where a similar idea is expressed in different words. For example, parallels exist between parts of 1 & 2 Kings 1:1-18 & 2 Chronicles, between parts of Galatians and Romans, between parts of Ephesians and Colossians, parts of 2 Peter and Jude, as well as between parts of Daniel and Revelation.

· Cross-reference resources can help locate other passages that speak about the same idea or event. But we should not assume that such reference materials are on the same level with the inspired Word of God. "Marginal references in various Bibles are famous (or infamous) for providing other materials which have a real or supposed bearing on the passage being studied. While these should be used, they should also be critically evaluated to see whether the citation is an actual parallel, merely a chance resemblance, or an apparent resemblance without true similarity of thought pattern."⁵ As responsible interpreters of the Word of God, we should carefully evaluate parallel passages to see whether they help us determine the author's intended meaning for the text we are studying.

·Guidelines for using Scripture to interpret Scripture: oAn obscure or ambiguous text should never be interpreted in such a way as to contradict the teaching of a plain or clear passage. For example, in 1 Corinthians 15:29 the words "baptized for the dead" should not be interpreted to mean that substitutionary baptism can somehow bring salvation to person who has already died. This would contradict the plain teaching of many other passages in Scripture. oA complicated or complex interpretation should not be given preference over a simple or more natural explanation. For example, in Matthew 16:28 when Jesus said, "Truly I say to you, there are some of those who

are standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom," He was obviously not referring to the Millennial Kingdom because all those present would die before that time. A simpler explanation is that He was referring to the foretaste of His kingdom which was experienced six days later on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-13). A Final Challenge

·We must not ignore the context when interpreting a passage of Scripture:

"It is a shameful thing to carelessly ignore the context. To deliberately violate the context is more than shameful; it is sinful, for it is a deliberate substitution of one's own words for the Word of God. The student of Scripture, though he may not understand the original languages, nevertheless has at his command the single most important tool -- the context. Let him use it diligently!"⁶ Resource List for Understanding the Context of a Passage Ranked in order beginning with the least complicated and least costly resources in each category.

Bible Handbooks Bible Handbooks provide outlines and overviews of every book in the Bible 1.Halley's Bible Handbook 2.New Unger's Bible Handbook 3.MacArthur's Bible Handbook 4.Larry Richards, The Illustrated Bible Handbook 5.Willmington's Bible Handbook and Willmington's Guide to the Bible 6.Book introductions and outlines in Study Bibles, Reference Bibles, or commentaries.

Bible Surveys Bible Surveys provide helpful overviews of the entire Word of God 1.Henrietta Mears, What the Bible is All About 2.Bruce Wilkinson and Ken Boa, Talk Thru the Bible 3.Jensen's Survey of the Old Testament and Jensen's Survey of the New Testament

4.Bryan Beyer and Bill Arnold, Encountering the Old Testament and Walter Elwell, Encountering the New Testament 5.Paul Benware, Survey of the Old Testament and Survey of the New Testament 6.Robert Gundry, Survey of the New Testament 7.Merrill Tenney, New Testament Survey

Comparing Scripture with Scripture Topical indexes and cross-reference resources provide ways to locate parallel passages in Scripture 1.Nave's Topical Bible 2.The Treasury of Scripture Knowledge 3.Topical Index of the Bible 4.Harmony of the Gospels 5.Marginal cross-reference systems in Study or Reference Bibles.

Endnotes

1 A. Berkeley Mickelsen, Interpreting the Bible, 104, 113.

2 Robertson McQuilkin, Understanding and Applying the Bible, 163.

3 McQuilkin, 156.

4 Mickelsen, 105.

5 Mickelsen, 100.

6 McQuilkin, 164.

04 - Understanding the Setting

Basic Bible Interpretation:

Understanding the Setting of a Bible Passage

Introduction

- As was mentioned in a previous section, there is a time gap, a distance gap, and a culture gap between us and the biblical writers, and we must bridge these gaps if we are to understand the writers' intended meaning in Scripture.

- Also in a previous section the concept of Progressive Revelation was mentioned in explaining that God's Word was given to mankind a little at a time throughout the course of human history. "The Bible is revelation in history. As such, we must understand it in the context of its history."¹ This principle could be stated this way: A Bible passage cannot be properly understood apart from its historical, geographical, and cultural setting.

- The historical period and the cultural environment in which the biblical writer lived have had an influence on the meaning of his writing. In order to understand the meaning of any passage, we should discover all we can about the writer of that passage: his background, where he was located, and his situation or circumstances when he was writing.

- A knowledge of the history and culture of the writer's time will also help us to understand how the original readers of the text would have understood it. We should find out as much as we can about the intended audience: their identity and the historical situation in which they would have read the author's words.

"Just as we may be puzzled by the way people do things in other countries, so we may be puzzled by what we read in the Bible. Therefore it is important to know what the people in the Bible thought, believed, said, did, and made. To the extent we do this we are then able to comprehend it better and communicate it more accurately. If we fail to give attention to these matters of culture, then we may be guilty of eisegesis, reading into the Bible our Western 20th-century ideas."² An Overview of Bible History Old Testament Times

- The events of Genesis 1:1-31; Genesis 2:1-25; Genesis 3:1-24; Genesis 4:1-26; Genesis 5:1-32; Genesis 6:1-22; Genesis 7:1-24; Genesis 8:1-22; Genesis 9:1-29; Genesis 10:1-32; Genesis 11:1-32 took place over a period of four to six thousand years (beginning some time between 8000 and 6000 B.C.). This included the Creation; the Fall and the judgment of God on human rebellion; the judgment of God upon human language at the Tower of Babel; the judgment of God at the global Flood through which all human beings and land animals were put to death (except for faithful Noah, his family, and the animals on the Ark); God's institution of new rules for human government and the growth of the different people groups, tribes, and nations of the world from the descendants of Noah.

- The time of Abraham and the patriarchs (Genesis 12:1-20; Genesis 13:1-18; Genesis 14:1-24; Genesis 15:1-21; Genesis 16:1-16; Genesis 17:1-27; Genesis 18:1-33; Genesis 19:1-38; Genesis 20:1-18; Genesis 21:1-34; Genesis 22:1-24; Genesis 23:1-20; Genesis 24:1-67; Genesis 25:1-34; Genesis 26:1-35; Genesis 27:1-46; Genesis 28:1-22; Genesis 29:1-35; Genesis 30:1-43; Genesis 31:1-55; Genesis 32:1-32; Genesis 33:1-20; Genesis 34:1-31; Genesis 35:1-29; Genesis 36:1-43; Genesis 37:1-36; Genesis 38:1-30; Genesis 39:1-23; Genesis 40:1-23 w:1-23; Genesis 41:1-57; Genesis 42:1-38; Genesis 43:1-34; Genesis 44:1-34; Genesis 45:1-28; Genesis 46:1-34; Genesis 47:1-31; Genesis 48:1-22; Genesis 49:1-33; Genesis 50:1-26) began about 2100 B.C., during which time Job also lived. By this time the large nations of Egypt and Mesopotamia were already well established. During this period God's focus was on faithful Abraham and his descendants. God made specific promises to Abraham, including the fact that his descendants would become a great nation.
- The Exodus of the nation of Israel from Egypt occurred about 1450 B.C. (Exodus to Deuteronomy). During a forty-year period God revealed to Moses new laws, customs, and ways of living that were to be implemented by His chosen nation.
- During the conquest and occupation of Canaan (Joshua to Ruth), the new nation entered the promised land and lived there under the direct guidance of God, as well as under judges which He provided. This sad period involved several cycles of faithfulness and apostasy by God's chosen people. During their times of apostasy God brought various nations to oppress them until they returned to faithfulness. These oppressors included the smaller nations immediately surrounding Israel: Moabites, Ammonites, Amalekites, Midianites, Canaanites, and Philistines. None of the larger "super-power" nations were strong enough to dominate the region at this time (1400 - 1100 B.C.)
- Israel demanded a king to rule them, and First Samuel contains the record of the first king that Samuel anointed (Saul). This record covers the period of time between the birth of Samuel and the death of Saul (1095 - 1011 B.C.) King David was the second king that Samuel anointed, so his life is described in Second Samuel (and First Chronicles). The "Golden Age" of Israel was during the reigns of David and Solomon (1010 - 931 B.C.). The life of King Solomon is described in 1 Kings 1:1-53; 1 Kings 2:1-46; 1 Kings 3:1-28; 1 Kings 4:1-34; 1 Kings 5:1-18; 1 Kings 6:1-38; 1 Kings 7:1-51; 1 Kings 8:1-66; 1 Kings 9:1-28; 1 Kings 10:1-29; 1 Kings 11:1-43 and 2 Chronicles 1:1-17; 2 Chronicles 2:1-18; 2 Chronicles 3:1-17; 2 Chronicles 4:1-22; 2 Chronicles 5:1-14; 2 Chronicles 6:1-42; 2 Chronicles 7:1-22; 2 Chronicles 8:1-18; 2 Chronicles 9:1-31.
- Around 930 B.C. the kingdom was divided, with the northern ten tribes of Israel making their headquarters in Samaria while the southern tribes of Judah and Benjamin maintained their capitol in Jerusalem (1 Kings 12:1-33 to 2 Kings 17:1-41, and 2 Chronicles 10:1-19; 2 Chronicles 11:1-23; 2 Chronicles 12:1-16; 2 Chronicles 13:1-22; 2 Chronicles 14:1-15; 2 Chronicles 15:1-19; 2 Chronicles 16:1-14; 2 Chronicles 17:1-19; 2 Chronicles 18:1-34; 2 Chronicles 19:1-11; 2 Chronicles 20:1-37; 2 Chronicles 21:1-20; 2 Chronicles 22:1-12; 2 Chronicles 23:1-21; 2 Chronicles 24:1-27; 2 Chronicles 25:1-28; 2 Chronicles 26:1-23; 2 Chronicles 27:1-9; 2 Chronicles 28:1-27). It was during this time that the nation of Assyria became an international "super power" that began to dominate the region. It was also during this period that the prophets Jonah, Amos, Hosea, Micah, and Isaiah were active in ministry.

- In 722 B.C. the northern kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrians who scattered these Israelites across their empire. Afterward the Babylonians rose to become the dominant "super power" in the region. In 586 B.C. the southern kingdom of Judah fell to the Babylonians and were taken away as captives (2 Kings 18:1-37; 2 Kings 19:1-37; 2 Kings 20:1-21; 2 Kings 21:1-26; 2 Kings 22:1-20; 2 Kings 23:1-37; 2 Kings 24:1-20; 2 Kings 25:1-30 and 2 Chronicles 29:1-36; 2 Chronicles 30:1-27; 2 Chronicles 31:1-21; 2 Chronicles 32:1-33; 2 Chronicles 33:1-25; 2 Chronicles 34:1-33; 2 Chronicles 35:1-27; 2 Chronicles 36:1-23). During this time the prophets Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Obadiah, and Jeremiah were active in ministry.
- Jeremiah had predicted a seventy-year captivity in Babylon, but after their exile several groups of Jews were allowed to return to their homeland between 539-444 B.C. (see Ezra, Esther, and Nehemiah). During this time the prophets Ezekiel, Daniel, Haggai, Zechariah, Joel, and Malachi were active in ministry.
- New Testament events would only begin after a silence of approximately 400 years (sometimes called the intertestamental period). It was during this time that the Old Testament canon was finalized, and the Old Testament also was translated into the Greek language by a group of seventy Jewish scholars. In addition, this period saw the rise to power of the final two empires (Greece and Rome) predicted in the prophecies of Daniel.

New Testament Times

- "But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son" (Galatians 4:4). The four gospel accounts of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John cover the time period during the life of the Lord Jesus Christ (approximately 5 B.C. to A.D. 30).
- After the resurrection and ascension, Christ's followers began telling their world what He had accomplished. The book of Acts covers this 30-year period during which the early church was actively spreading the good news of Christ. It was also during this time that many of the early epistles were written, including Galatians, James 1:1-27 st and 2 Thessalonians 1:1-12 st and 2nd Corinthians, Romans, Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon, and Philipppians.
- It was during the period between A.D. 60-95 that the remaining New Testament books were written, including 1st and 2nd Timothy, Titus, Hebrews 1:1-14 st and 2nd Peter, Jude, 1st John, 2nd John, 3rd John, and Revelation.

What is Included in the Setting of a Bible Passage?

- The "setting" contains at least three aspects: Historical, Cultural, and Geographical.
- It includes how people thought, what they believed, communicated, and created during the time when the passage was written. It involves their ways of speaking, their customs and practices, and the environment of the society in which they lived. A listing of some of these things would include the religion, politics, warfare, geography, law, agriculture, business, economics, architecture, clothing, social customs, and domestic activities of people during that time.

Examples of Understanding the Setting

Politics Understanding civil or international affairs at the time the passage was written

- Why would Ahaz refuse to ask the Lord for a sign after Isaiah commanded him to do so (Isaiah 7:10-14)? This whole incident was intricately connected with the political situation at the time. Pekah (king of the northern kingdom of Israel in Samaria) and Rezin (king of the Aramean people in Damascus) made an alliance to oppose the approaching Assyrian threat. Ahaz (king of the southern kingdom in Jerusalem) refused to join them, so the northern alliance attacked the southern kingdom. Ahaz appealed to Assyria for help, rather than appealing to God for deliverance (2 Kings 16:7-9). His refusal to call upon God for a sign (Isaiah 7:12) simply affirmed his godless character and his complete confidence in his alliance with Assyria (as if to say, "Who needs God when we have Assyria on our side?")
- Why would Belshazzar offer Daniel the third highest position in the land (Daniel 5:7)? Actually it was the highest position available, since Belshazzar himself was only second in command under his father Nabonidus, who was out of the country at the time.

Religion Understanding the religious practices of God's people or those of surrounding nations

- Why did Moses forbid Israel from cooking a young goat in its mother's milk (Exodus 23:19; Exodus 34:26; Deuteronomy 14:21)? According to archaeological evidence, this procedure was part of a pagan religious ritual among the Canaanites. God prohibited Israel from practicing the pagan rites of those whose land He was giving them.
- Why would Elijah suggest Mount Carmel as the site of his showdown with the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18:19)? The followers of Baal thought that Mount Carmel was the dwelling place of their god, so Elijah was giving them every advantage in the contest (as he did when he poured water on the wood for his own sacrifice to God). This way the weakness or impotence of Baal would be even more evident.

Geography Understanding the significance of the places and physical surroundings of the biblical author

- Why did David flee to En Gedi (1 Samuel 23:29)? En Gedi was south of Jericho and west of the Dead Sea, and the terrain in that area is extremely difficult to navigate. There were also caves in that area in which David could hide, as well as a year-round spring of fresh water. This kind of territory would make a logical hiding place.
- Why would Jesus say that a man must "go down" from Jerusalem to Jericho (Luke 10:30) when Jericho is located to the northeast of Jerusalem on the map? Jesus was speaking of the difference in altitude because a man must descend about 2000 feet in elevation when traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho.

Economics Understanding the way business was carried out during the time the passage was written

- Why would the closest relative of Naomi's husband give his sandal to Boaz (Ruth 4:8)? According to ancient manuscripts, this was done when the sale of land was completed. It was the previous owner's symbolic statement releasing any further right to walk on that land.
- Why would a Christian deliberately purchase food that had been sacrificed to idols (1 Corinthians 8:1-13)? After people offered meat as a sacrifice in the pagan temples of Corinth, that

same meat would be sold at a discount in nearby markets. Frugal household managers knew that this would be an economical way to provide food for the table -- and besides, Christians "know that there is no such thing as an idol in the world, and that there is no God but one" (1 Corinthians 8:4).

Law Understanding the law system of the time when the biblical author wrote

- When Elisha begged Elijah for a "double portion" of his spirit (2 Kings 2:9), was he being greedy in asking for twice as much power as Elijah? According to Deuteronomy 21:17, the rightful heir was to inherit a double portion of the estate, so Elisha was simply asking to be named as Elijah's heir and successor in ministry.
- Why did Boaz take his legal matters to the city gate (Ruth 4:1)? The city gate was where legal business was typically conducted during Old Testament times. The city elders and judges would sit in a special area just inside the gate to hold court (see Deuteronomy 21:18-21; Deuteronomy 22:13-15; Joshua 20:4; Job 29:7).

Warfare Understanding the methods of waging war during Bible times

- Why would Jonah be so reluctant to go to Nineveh? The Assyrians were ruthless in how they treated their enemies. They would behead the leaders of conquered nations and stack these heads in piles. Sometimes they impaled their enemies on tall poles, or they would stake out the extremities and skin the person alive. Jonah may have feared such treatment, but he certainly did not think such a cruel people deserved God's message of repentance and grace.
- Why did Habakkuk say the Babylonians "laugh at every fortress and heap up rubble to capture it" (Habakkuk 1:10)? He was not saying that the Babylonian army went around collecting trash, but that they would build mighty siege ramps against the wall of a fortress. These ramps would be constructed from rock, earth, and any other materials that were available.

Agriculture Understanding the seasonal agricultural practices during the time of the Bible writer

- Was there anything unusual in the situation when Samuel asked the Lord for rain at the time of the wheat harvest (1 Samuel 12:17)? The time of year for the wheat harvest was in the early summer, after the six-month dry season had already started. If rain were to come during this dry season, it clearly would declare the power of God.
- When Amos called the women of Bethel "cows of Bashan" was he saying they were overweight (Amos 4:1)? Bashan was a lush area northeast of the Sea of Galilee, and the cattle there did become fat. But Amos is saying that the women of Bethel were lazy and carefree in their prosperity. They did nothing else but enjoy their wealth, which had been gained at the expense of oppressing the poor.

Domestic Affairs Understanding the details of household life in biblical times

- What was the meaning of the phrase "Gird up your loins like a man" (Job 38:3; Job 40:7; Isaiah 50:7)? A man would wear a robe tied with a wide sash at his waist, but when he was working, running, or fighting he would lift his robe and tuck it into the sash so his legs would have their full range of motion. This phrase represented the man's ability to respond quickly to a specific situation.

- Why were the five young women considered foolish for not having extra oil for their lamps (Matthew 25:1-13)? Oil lamps in those days were small enough to be held in the palm of the hand, and they would not hold enough oil to burn for several hours. It was well-known that these events could last for several hours, so the oil would clearly be consumed before the event was over.

Social Customs Understanding the expected behaviors and expressions of civility during the period of the biblical writer

- Why did Joseph shave before he went to see the Pharaoh (Genesis 41:14)? Even though the Hebrews normally grew and wore beards, the Egyptian custom was to be clean-shaven. In order not to offend the Pharaoh, Joseph followed the local custom and shaved his beard.

- Why did Christ apparently insult a man for saying he wanted to go bury his father before becoming His follower (Luke 9:59)? The man was not saying that his father had recently died. Instead this was a customary way of saying he was obligated to wait for his father's death, even if it meant waiting several years, so that he would not miss out on inheriting his father's estate. The man was not being compassionate as much as greedy.

Concluding Thought

· In order to accurately understand a Bible passage, we must understand the original setting in which it was written and read by those who received it. "It is apparent that ignorance of these customs could result in misunderstanding the meaning of the passages. The Bible student confronts many other customs as he reads the Bible. It is wise, therefore, to be alert to unusual customs referred to and to determine what the passages meant to the people in those original settings."³ Resource List for Understanding the Setting Ranked in order beginning with the least complicated and least costly resources in each category.

Bible DictionariesA Bible dictionary provides brief articles on almost everything mentioned in the Bible 1.Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary 2.New Unger's Bible Dictionary 3.New Bible Dictionary

Bible EncyclopediasA Bible encyclopedia provides more detailed articles on almost everything mentioned in the Bible 1.Zondervan Pictorial Bible Encyclopedia 2.International Standard Bible Encyclopedia

Bible AtlasesA Bible atlas provides maps as well as brief descriptions of the events that took place in each geographical area mentioned in the Bible 1.Holman Bible Atlas 2.Zondervan NIV Atlas of the Bible 3.Moody Atlas of Bible Lands 4.Macmillan Bible Atlas

Bible History ResourcesThese resources provide more detailed descriptions of the historical situations faced by the Bible writers throughout the period covered by the Scriptures 1.Old Testament Times, R.K. Harrison 2.The Old Testament Speaks, Samuel Schultz 3.New Testament Times, Merrill Tenney

Bible Culture ResourcesThese resources provide more detailed information about the practices and customs of the people during Bible times 1.New Manners and Customs of Bible Times, Ralph Gower 2.Today's Handbook of Bible Times and Customs, William Coleman 3.Manners & Customs in the Bible, Victor Matthews 4.Illustrated Manners and Customs of the Bible, J.I. Packer and Merrill Tenney

Bible Introductions Despite the title, these resources are typically not "introductory" treatments of each Bible book, but provide very detailed and scholarly information about such critical issues as the dating and authorship of every book in the Bible 1. Survey of Old Testament Introduction, Gleason Archer 2. New Testament Introduction, Donald Guthrie

Endnotes

1 Robertson McQuilkin, Understanding and Applying the Bible, 91.

2 Roy Zuck, Basic Bible Interpretation, 79.

3 Zuck, 89.

05 - Special Topics in Bible Interpretation

Basic Bible Interpretation:

Special Topics in Bible Interpretation

Introduction

· The special topics in Bible interpretation all center around the use of figurative language in the Scriptures. Figurative language involves "the representation of one concept in terms of another because the nature of the two things compared allows such an analogy to be drawn. Nearly all figures of speech come out of the life of the speaker or writer who uses them. This means that the student who understands the background of the writer will better understand his figurative language. Most writers, for example, use comparison to explain the unfamiliar by that which is already familiar to the reader."¹

· These figures of speech are very common in all language, and they are used to express things in interesting ways. It is important to remember that even when figurative "picture talk" is used, it is always intended to express a literal truth. Even though figurative language is widely used, it can present a dilemma to the Bible interpreter. "Picture-talk is one of the greatest problems of interpretation. To treat figurative language as if it were literal, and to treat literal language as if it were figurative, constitute two of the greatest hindrances to understanding the meaning of the Bible."² Reasons for Figurative Language

· Figurative language is often used to speak about abstract concepts in terms of concrete things. All human speech contains this type of language because it is intrinsic to the way people communicate.

Very often when we are talking about something which is not perceptible by the five senses, we use words which in one of their meanings refer to things or actions that are. When a man says that he grasps an argument he is using a verb (grasp) which literally means to take something in the hand but he is certainly not thinking that his mind has hands or that an argument can be seized. To avoid the word grasp he may change the form of the expression and say, "I see your point," but he does not mean that a pointed object has appeared in his visual field. Everyone is familiar with this linguistic phenomenon and the grammarians call it metaphor. But it is a serious mistake to think that metaphor is an optional thing which poets and authors may put into their work as a decoration and plain speakers can do without. The truth is that if we are going to talk at all about things which are not perceived by the senses, we are forced to use language metaphorically. There is no other way of talking. Anyone who talks about things that cannot be seen, or touched, or heard, or the like, must inevitably talk as if they could be seen or touched or heard.³

Some topics can only be discussed using this type of language. For example, almost all of the Bible language used to describe God involves metaphor because that is the only way that finite creatures can speak about the Infinite Creator.

- Figurative language is sometimes used to emphasize a point, make a vivid impression, or attract attention. A colorful figure of speech typically causes a response of surprise and immediate interest for the listener or reader. When told that King Herod wanted to kill him, Jesus could have said, "Go and tell the king..." Instead Jesus said, "Go and tell that fox..." (Luke 13:32). This startling expression certainly would have captured the attention of everyone who heard it.
- Figurative language can motivate people to take action. Instead of saying, "I am waiting for you to respond," Jesus told the church at Laodicea, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me" (Revelation 3:20). This figure of speech would have evoked a powerful emotional response in the culture of that time.
- Figurative language may aid the memory. Most figures of speech create lasting impressions, and many are absolutely unforgettable. The Pharisees would never forget Jesus' description of them as "whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men's bones" (Matthew 23:27).
- Figurative language adds color and vividness for illustrating or clarifying a point. A figure of speech graphically presents truth without using complicated descriptions. King David spoke volumes about his relationship with God when he said, "The Lord is my shepherd" (Psalms 23:1). All that a shepherd is and does could be applied to God's watchful care over him by using a single, concise phrase.
- Figurative language also can be used to obscure the meaning for all but an intended audience. In rare cases the intention of a Bible figure or riddle is to hide the meaning, as one would do by communicating in code. Jesus explained to His disciples why He often spoke in parables: "To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God, but to the rest it is in parables, so that seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand" (Luke 8:10). Matthew 13:34-35 explains that "All these things Jesus spoke to the crowds in parables, and He did not speak to them without a parable. This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet: 'I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter things hidden since the foundation of the world.'" In this case, it was part of the eternal plan of God that only the chosen few would be able to understand Jesus' words during His earthly ministry.

General Guidelines for Interpreting Figurative Language

- The purpose of studying figurative language in the Bible is to understand the meaning intended by the author of that passage.

Christ told us that we are the salt of the earth, and we are not free to choose our own preference as to what comparison was intended. We must search diligently to discern what comparison he intended. I once heard a fascinating sermon in which many characteristics of salt were used in analogy to exhort Christians toward more appropriate behavior.

1. Salt was used as a preservative, so the presence of Christians in the world will keep it from moral decay.
2. Salt enhances flavor, so Christians are to add a flavor of godliness to a tasteless society.

3. In the Old Testament there was a salt covenant and a salt offering, indicating that God is a covenant God who keeps His promises. In the same way, Christians are to keep their promises and demonstrate through their lives that God is faithful.

4. Salt was not to remain isolated in a container but was meant to be sprinkled around. Likewise, Christians should not remain in monasteries isolated from society, but should distribute themselves around in order to have an impact on their world.

5. Salt has an impact out of proportion to its size. In the same way, a small minority of Christians can impact a large portion of their world. Is it legitimate to make all of those points of comparison with the assurance that Jesus had all of that in mind when He said, "You are the salt of the earth"? No, for the first task of the interpreter is to discern what the author had in mind by way of comparison, not what our own experience or our own ingenuity may devise. The guideline is this: the intent of the author must control our understanding of his meaning.⁴

· Bible language should be understood in its normal, ordinary, or literal sense unless there is a convincing reason for considering it otherwise: If a statement would be absurd, irrational, or impossible if taken literally then the author is probably using a figure of speech. Examples of this would include trees clapping their hands (Isaiah 55:12) or a person being referred to as a dog (Php 3:2), a door (John 10:7), or a lamb (John 1:36). If an inanimate object is used to describe a living thing, then the statement may be considered to be figurative. For example, Jesus described Himself by saying He is the bread of life (John 6:35) and the light of the world (John 8:12). In a similar way, when life and activity are attributed to inanimate objects, these statements can also be considered to be figurative expressions. If a statement would lead to an immoral action, then the figurative sense is probably intended. Eating the flesh and drinking the blood of Jesus (John 6:53-58) would be an act of cannibalism, so this passage should be interpreted as a figure of speech. Also, if a passage runs counter to the statement of another clear passage of Scripture, it is legitimate to question whether that passage can be taken literally. For example, hating your "father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters" (Luke 14:26) is contrary to the teaching of both the Old and New Testaments, so the interpreter must view this as a figurative expression. (See the related passage in Matthew 10:37 for a clear interpretation.)

· Often the context of a passage will point out whether a figure of speech is intended. In many cases, the figurative passage is followed by a clear interpretation. For example, those who are "asleep" (1 Thessalonians 4:13-15) are later described as those who have actually died (1 Thessalonians 4:16). Also, the word "sword" must be understood figuratively in Ephesians 6:17, (1) because of the prepositional phrase "of the Spirit" and (2) because of the subsequent explanation: "which is the Word of God."

· The background and setting of the author and the original readers must control our understanding of what is literal or figurative language, rather than relying on our own background, setting, perceptions, or presuppositions. "The appropriateness of a particular figure is not for us to evaluate. Rather, we must evaluate the language in terms of what the author intended."⁵

Figurative speech, as already discussed, is a picturesque, out-of-the-ordinary way of presenting literal facts that might otherwise be stated in a normal, plain, ordinary way. Saying that "the argument does not hold water" is an unusual way of saying the more ordinary sentence, "The

argument is weak." Both sentences convey a literal fact. One conveys it in a figurative fashion, the other in a nonfigurative way. In other words, as Radmacher put it, "Behind every figure of speech is a literal meaning, and by means of the historical-grammatical exegesis of the text, these literal meanings are to be sought out." Any figure of speech depends on ordinary-literal language. When Peter wrote, "The devil prowls around like a roaring lion" (1 Peter 5:8), the legitimacy of that figurative comparison is based on our understanding of something about actual lions. The same is true of types, symbols, parables, allegories, and fables.⁶ Identifying Types of Figurative Language

· **Figures of Comparison.** This is the most common type of figurative language in the Bible, and it typically expresses a similarity between two things that are otherwise dissimilar. In examining figures of comparison, remember that ordinarily only one point of comparison is intended. The comparisons are limited, and the reader is not permitted to improvise or decide what point of comparison he likes best or finds compatible with his doctrinal structure. If we are not careful, the Scriptures will no longer be an independent authority, sitting in judgment on our ideas, but rather we interpreters will become the authorities, building unsound doctrine on misapprehension of a figurative biblical expression.⁷

· **Figures of Substitution.** This involves having one thing represent another or stand in place of another thing. In figures of substitution sometimes part of a thing will be spoken of as if it were the whole thing, or the whole may stand for only a part.

· **Figures of Personification.** This involves taking a characteristic of a person and attributing it to a non-personal object, or attributing a human characteristic to God.

· **Figures of Exaggeration or Irony.** This involves saying more than is literally required, or saying the opposite of what is literally meant.

· **Rhetorical Questions.** This involves asking questions without expecting an answer. This forces the reader to think about the answer and consider its implications for affirming a specific truth.

· **Idiomatic Expressions.** An idiom is an expression that cannot be understood simply from the meanings of the individual words of which it is composed. Usually it is unique to a particular group of people, and in order to understand the intended meaning we must bridge the gap between ourselves and that group.

Principles for Interpreting Figurative Language

1. Determine whether figurative language is being used. Use the general guidelines above to determine whether a passage contains a figure of speech. It would violate the principle to authorial intent to interpret a figurative passage literally, or to interpret a literal passage figuratively. Sometimes a normal statement is wrongly taken as a figure of speech; for example, when John wrote that 144,000 will be sealed with 12,000 from each of the 12 tribes of Israel (Revelation 7:4-8), there is no compelling reason to understand this statement figuratively.

2. Determine what the figure of speech(image)is referring to(referent). For example, Isaiah 8:7 says, "Therefore the Lord is about to bring against them the mighty floodwaters of the River." How are we to determine whether these floodwaters are literal or figurative? This is a figurative expression because the very next phrase gives the referent: "the mighty king of Assyria with all his pomp." The floodwaters are the image and the king of Assyria is the referent. "Sometimes the

image is stated, but the nonimage or referent, though not given explicitly, is suggested by the context. In Luke 5:34 the bridegroom is not said to be Jesus, but the meaning is implicit since Jesus said in the next verse that the bridegroom would be taken from them. The guests of the bridegroom are not specified, though they are most likely Jesus' disciples who are eating and drinking, much like bridegroom guests."⁸

3. Determine the specific point of comparison that is being made between the image and the referent. For example, Isaiah 53:6 says, "All we, like sheep, have gone astray." The image is sheep, the referent is human beings, and the specific point of comparison is the tendency of sheep to stray off on their own, just as human beings stray away from their Shepherd and Creator. Not every aspect of sheep is part of this figurative comparison - only their tendency to stray is being emphasized.

4. Determine the specific meaning that was intended by the biblical author when he used a particular figure of speech in a specific context. Treat each figure of speech individually according to its specific context, and do not assume that a particular figure always means the same thing throughout the Bible. For example, in Hosea 6:4 the figure of "dew" is used to describe the transience of Judah's loyalty to God, but in Hosea 14:5 the figure of "dew" describes the Lord's blessing on them.

Interpreting Biblical Prophecy

· Bible prophecy is a special topic because it often makes use of figurative language, and because there are special time elements involved in the prophet's message. The two aspects of biblical prophecy have sometimes been called foretelling and forthtelling because there is a future predictive element as well as a message of exhortation, reproof, correction, or instruction to a specific people living at a specific time in history. To correctly interpret biblical prophecy, "We need an approach that will read nothing into prophecy that is not there, that will make clear all that the prophet said or wrote to his own people, and that will make the correctly interpreted message of the prophet relevant to our own times."⁹

· Prophecy does have a predictive element, but we must never forget that biblical prophecy was spoken into a specific historical situation with the intention of motivating a particular group of people to action in their own day. The foretelling of the future was included to show that God is working out His plan in history and is moving forward according to His own timetable. God's future actions were meant to influence what the readers or listeners were doing at the time they heard the message. In light of His future activity, they were meant to live differently from those who ignore God. "To lose sight of the original hearers and to focus our attention on what may tickle the fancy of the curious-minded in the present day is to lose sight of the very reason for the message. This results in a tragic distortion of the purpose behind the prophecy."¹⁰

· The primary guideline for interpreting biblical prophecy is to view the passage in its normal, simple, direct, ordinary meaning unless there is a convincing reason to do otherwise. Just as with any other Bible language, we should understand predictive passages literally unless there are specific reasons for viewing them in some figurative sense. "Of course figurative and symbolic language is used extensively in prophetic passages, but this does not mean that all prophecy is figurative or symbolic. We should begin with the assumption that the words are to be taken in their

normal sense unless a figure of speech or symbol is indicated. Deeper and mystical senses should not be sought."¹¹ For example, when Isaiah described life during the Millennial Kingdom he said that many people would live well beyond 100 years of age (Isaiah 65:20), and that they will "build houses and inhabit them; they will also plant vineyards and eat their fruit" (Isaiah 65:21). There is nothing in this text that suggests that it should be taken figuratively, but it should be interpreted in its normal, ordinary meaning as it describes what life will be like in that glorious future time.

· Regarding the future time elements of prophecy, we must understand that God did not give his prophets unlimited vision. They were given a limited or "foreshortened" perspective on future events, much like an artist has when viewing the peaks of the Rocky Mountains from a distance. For example, many of the prophets saw the two comings of Christ as if they were two distant mountain peaks which appeared to be in close proximity, even though there were long unseen "valleys" of time between them (see Isaiah 9:6-7). Looking back from our perspective in history, however, we can clearly see this "valley" of time between the first and second coming of Christ.

Resource List for Special Topics in Interpretation Ranked in order beginning with the least complicated and least costly resources in each category.

Figures of Speech 1.Basic Bible Interpretation (Chapter 7), Roy Zuck 2.Understanding and Applying the Bible (Chapter 12), Robertson McQuilkin 3.Interpreting the Bible (Chapters 8-10), A. Berkeley Mickelsen 4.Figures of Speech Used in the Bible, E. W. Bullinger

Parables 1.Basic Bible Interpretation (Chapter 9), Roy Zuck 2.Understanding and Applying the Bible (Chapter 13), Robertson McQuilkin 3.All the Parables of the Bible, Herbert Lockyer 4.Interpreting the Parables, Craig Blomberg Symbols and Types 1.Basic Bible Interpretation (Chapter 8), Roy Zuck 2.Protestant Biblical Interpretation (Chapter 9), Bernard Ramm 3.Interpreting the Bible (Chapters 11-12), A. Berkeley Mickelsen 4.Interpreting the Symbols and Types, Kevin Conner

Prophecy 1.Understanding Bible Prophecy for Yourself, Tim LaHaye 2.Basic Bible Interpretation (Chapter 10), Roy Zuck 3.Understanding and Applying the Bible (Chapter 18), Robertson McQuilkin 4.The Interpretation of Prophecy, Paul Tan

Endnotes

1 A. Berkeley Mickelsen, Interpreting the Bible, 179-180.

2 Robertson McQuilkin, Understanding and Applying the Bible, 166.

3 C. S. Lewis, Miracles, 88-89.

4 McQuilkin, 172-173.

5 McQuilkin, 172.

6 Roy Zuck, Basic Bible Interpretation, 147.

7 McQuilkin, 174.

8 Zuck, 164.

9 Mickelsen, 280.

10 Mickelsen, 288.

11 Zuck, 242.

06 - Applying the Scripture to Life Today

Basic Bible Interpretation:

Applying the Scriptures to Our Lives Today

Introduction

- In previous sessions we have discussed the steps for properly interpreting language, as well as for bridging the time gap, the distance gap, and the culture gap. In the last session we discussed special topics in the interpretation of figures of speech and prophecy.
- This final session will focus on how to handle Bible difficulties, how to understand the systematic unity of the Bible, and how to properly apply the message of the Bible to our lives today.

Dealing with Alleged Contradictions or Difficulties in the Bible

- From our previous studies it is apparent that many Scripture passages are challenging to interpret because of the significant gaps between us and the Bible writers. But we must not assume that difficult passages are impossible to interpret, or that these difficulties mean there are errors in God's Word. This is why we need to remember the first general principle for approaching the Bible that we discussed in our very first class: Work from the assumption that the Bible is God's only inspired, inerrant, and authoritative revelation to us.

- In a previous session we discussed the principle that Scripture interprets Scripture. Now, when dealing with difficulties in Bible interpretation we need to recognize a related principle: "Scripture cannot contradict Scripture."

· In general, how are Bible difficulties to be handled? "We do not grant that a problem is unsolvable and then proceed to interpret the passage as if it were in error. We hold that a possible solution is all that is demanded. We do not have to prove that a possible interpretation is the correct solution but simply that there is a reasonable solution to the apparent problem. Since the Bible has proven itself trustworthy through the ages, we hold it innocent until proved guilty. When problems are unresolved, it is not the Bible that is wrong, but rather our understanding of it."¹ Principles for dealing with Difficulties in the Bible²

1. To say that Scripture is inspired even to the word and that there is no error does not mean that verbal identity is necessary. It is only necessary that the words convey the truth. For example, notice the differences between Matthew 17:14-16, Mark 9:17-18, and Luke 9:38-40 Which of these statements did the man actually make? He may have made all of them, with one gospel writer selecting part of his conversation and another selecting another part. There can be no true meaning without accurate words to convey that meaning. But there may be more than one way to express the same meaning accurately.

2. One author's purpose may be different from that of another. For that reason, many details are not relevant to his purpose and so may be left out. The biblical author did not add things that did not take place but, quite legitimately, was selective in what he did record.

3. Christ said similar things on different occasions. Not only did He say similar things, He also did similar things. I am confident that if He Himself had not referred to the feeding of the 5,000 and the feeding of the 4,000 as two separate events, some interpreters would have assumed that they were the same event and would have noted a conflict between the two accounts.

4. The rules for writing history were not the same in the Hebrew/Greek culture of biblical times as they are today. The natural language of everyday life was used, and there was not often a felt need to have an exact transcription such as we would require for court records today.

5. New Testament quotations of the Old Testament are not required to be exact. Most of the quotations are from the common Bible in the time of Christ, a Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament. Often the Old Testament passage is abbreviated or just the thought is conveyed.

6. The Bible must be considered authoritative where it conflicts with other books of ancient history. Even from an antibiblical perspective, the Bible is the most accurate historical record of ancient history available. Archaeology has consistently validated biblical records. The Systematic Unity of the Scriptures

- Since God's Word was revealed to mankind progressively throughout human history, one of our tasks is to take the truths in the biblical record and begin to bring together the teaching about specific truths in a systematic way. In doing this, we must not forget that the most important step in this process is to carefully study each individual passage in its original context to determine the author's intended meaning.

· "All of us are systematic theologians. That is, we have various ideas about God that fit together in one way or another. The poor theologian is one who has an inadequate or limited view of God because he is aware of only some of the elements of revealed truth, or he is one who has a distorted view of God because he lacks an overall biblical perspective. A good theologian, on the other hand, is one who has taken into account all revealed truth about God and has related each part to a consistent whole."³ The Right Attitude for Theological Study

- It is essential that we remember: God is not as concerned with what we know as with what we are and how we behave. When approaching a theological study, we should have an attitude of humility. "But rock-bottom humility -- actually counting everyone else better than oneself (Php 2:3) -- is not always easy. How is it realized? Humility in regard to Bible doctrine comes as the result of facing certain facts. The sincere Bible student recognizes: (1) revelation is only partial, (2) we are finite, (3) we are fallen, (4) we need an open mind, and (5) we must be willing to obey."⁴

- In God's wisdom He has chosen not to reveal some things to mankind (see Deuteronomy 29:29; Proverbs 25:2; 1 Corinthians 13:12). Even if God did fully reveal His thoughts to us, we would not be able to completely comprehend them because we are finite creatures and God is the infinite Creator who is the only One actually able to "think outside the box" of the created order (see Isaiah 55:8-9).

Principles for Theological Study

- Doctrine should be based on a careful study of each relevant Scripture.

We must remember to practice all of the principles of interpretation that we have learned, and these principles should be applied diligently to every individual Bible passage that contributes to our understanding of a particular doctrine. As always, our goal should be to determine the intended meaning of the author in each case, and we should carefully identify and consider all of the relevant passages. These passages become the "data" on the subject under consideration, and we should organize this data in a way that clearly arranges the various elements of a doctrine into a coherent whole.

- Various Bible passages should be given their appropriate place.

Not all of the biblical materials are of equal weight in formulating sound doctrine. "All data on a given subject should be considered, and that subject should be related to other relevant subjects; however, equal weight should not be given to every text that provides a building block for the doctrine."⁵

Several guidelines can help us carefully evaluate the biblical material:

1. Clear passages must be given preference over obscure passages.

Doctrine should never be established on passages whose meaning is unclear. "If the author's intended meaning is not altogether certain, and interpreters are at odds as to its meaning, the text is not an ideal building block for doctrine. The weight of a doctrine or teaching should rest on the solid foundation of clear teaching."⁶

2. Repeated teachings should be given greater weight.

Teaching that is repeatedly emphasized in the Bible should also be emphasized when it comes to building a system of theology. We should emphasize what Scripture emphasizes. "It is not wise to build an important doctrine on an isolated text, even though it is true that God does not need to speak twice to make His statements authoritative."⁷

3. Direct non-figurative teaching must be given preference.

Passages containing direct teaching are sometimes called "didactic" passages, and they present straightforward instruction. "The structure of Bible doctrine ... should not be built on figurative, poetic, or historical passages, unless that picture language or those historical passages are literally interpreted by Scripture."⁸

4. Progressive revelation that is newer is preferred over earlier revelation.

The nature of God's Word as revelation in history means that earlier instructions may be superseded, replaced, or amplified by later revelation. "That does not mean that an Old Testament teaching may be set aside without New Testament authorization. It does mean, however, that a Christian doctrinal structure must rest squarely on the New Testament and on those Old Testament teachings and passages that underlie and provide the foundation for New Testament teaching."⁹ Applying the Scriptures to Our Lives Today

- There is only one valid interpretation of a Scripture passage, but there may be many valid applications of the principles contained in a passage. "Texts have only one meaning. The meaning is the author's intended one, but the applications of that meaning may refer to situations which the author, in a different time and culture, never envisioned."¹⁰

- Regarding the application of Bible truth to believers today Roy Zuck said, "Neglecting to apply the Scriptures reduces Bible study to an academic exercise in which we are concerned only for interpretation with little or no regard for its relevance for and impact on our lives. It is wrong to think of the Scriptures as only a sourcebook for information, as a book to be examined merely for the knowledge we can gain from it. Of course knowledge of the contents of the Bible and correct interpretation of it are essential. But more is needed. We must have a responsive heart, a willingness to appropriate the truths of the Scriptures into our own experience."¹¹

- Every biblical author wrote for a specific audience in their own historical situation, so how do their words relate to modern-day readers of God's Word? Do their words relate to us in the same way they did to the original audience? If not, then how are we to determine the appropriate application in our culture and time?

Principles for Applying the Bible Today

1. Proper INTERPRETATION is the foundation for proper APPLICATION.

If we do not accurately understand what a passage means, then it is almost certain we will not be able to determine how to apply it correctly to our lives. "Unfortunately, many people go to the Bible for a blessing or for guidance for the day, ignoring the interpretive process altogether. In their intense desire to find something devotional or practical, Christians sometimes distort the original meaning of some passage of Scripture. To bypass the purpose and original meaning of the passage, looking for a subjective impression, can lead to serious misuse of the Bible."¹²

2. Determine whether a passage is direct teaching or indirect illustration.

When the passage was originally written, was it prescriptive or descriptive? Prescriptive passages are those that give a command or a "prescription" for human behavior, and they often provide teaching intended for direct application. Descriptive passages simply tell what happened at a particular time, often without providing any value judgment as to whether this was good or bad. "When Scripture describes human actions without comment, it should not necessarily be assumed that those actions are approved. When Scripture describes an action of God with respect to human beings in a narrative passage, it should not be assumed that this is the way He will always work in believers' lives at every point in history."¹³

3. Recognize the differences in how God has worked with people throughout human history.

Every Bible reader is aware that at various points in history God dealt with different groups of people in different ways. God's command for Noah to build an ark is certainly not a prescription for behavior today. God's command for Israel to collect manna as food in the wilderness was obviously not intended to apply later in history. Some of God's instructions to people have changed, while others have carried over from one time period to another. For example, the Old Testament command to love your neighbor (Leviticus 19:18) still applies today (Romans 13:9; Galatians 5:14; James 2:8), but only nine of the Ten Commandments were carried over into the

New Testament. Some of the Old Testament commandments were completely nullified, such as the prohibition against eating certain foods (Leviticus 11:1-47 vs. Acts 10:9-16) and the requirement for circumcision (Leviticus 12:1-8 vs. Romans 4:1-25 and Galatians 5:1-26; Galatians 6:1-18).

4. Determine what is "normative" for today vs. what is limited to the biblical setting.

"Behavior that has a certain meaning in one culture may have a totally different significance in another culture. In American society, for a woman to follow her husband at a distance of fifteen feet, with her head down, would usually indicate a problem in their relationship. In another culture, this same behavior may be considered normal and expected. It may be necessary to change the behavioral expression of a scriptural command in order to translate the principle behind that command from one culture and time to another."¹⁴

It also may be helpful to determine the reason for a particular command or practice. If the reason for the command is limited to that specific cultural situation, then the command itself may also be limited in application. For example, when Paul said in Romans 15:1-33 that the Gentile churches had a duty to contribute to the needs of the church in Jerusalem, the reason for this command was given: "if the Gentiles have shared in their spiritual things, they are indebted to minister to them also in material things" (Romans 15:27). That believers have a duty to share materially with those who have blessed them spiritually is a reason which crosses all cultural boundaries.

Roy Zuck¹⁵ presents several guidelines for determining which biblical examples, commands, and practices apply today:

1. Some situations, commands, or principles are repeatable, continuous, or not revoked, and/or pertain to moral and theological subjects, and/or are repeated elsewhere in Scripture, and therefore are permanent and transferable to us.
2. Some situations, commands, or principles pertain to an individual's specific non-repeatable circumstances, and/or non-moral or non-theological subjects, and/or have been revoked, and are therefore not transferable to today.
3. Some situations or commands pertain to cultural settings that are only partially similar to ours and in which only the principles are transferable.
4. Some situations or commands pertain to cultural settings with no similarities but in which the principles are transferable.

5. Determine if a biblical command or practice is consistent with the overall message of the Bible as well as with the unchanging nature and character of God.

"If what happened to someone in Bible times is considered normative for all believers, it must be in harmony with what is taught elsewhere in Scripture. The fact that God used Elijah and Elisha each to raise a young man from death to life (1 Kings 17:17-23; 2 Kings 4:17-37) and used Peter to restore Dorcas to life (Acts 9:36-43) does not mean God intends for believers today to raise others from the dead. This is never indicated in Scripture as normative for all believers. ... Principles, to be valid, must be affirmed elsewhere in Scripture. How does God's sending ravens to feed Elijah during a drought (1 Kings 17:6) apply to us today? Obviously this does not mean God desires to

feed Christians by means of birds. Instead the principle is that God sometimes meets human needs by unusual means. The application of this principle is that believers can trust the Lord to supply their needs."¹⁶ Concluding Thoughts

- Every Christian should make it his goal to develop the qualities of balance, humility, and spiritual maturity in order to properly interpret and apply the Scriptures.
- Bible study should not be done simply for its own sake, or merely for increasing your own personal knowledge. Every diligent Bible student has a responsibility to share what has been learned. Ask God to provide an outlet for your Bible study efforts so that you can teach others what God is teaching you !
- Once we are able to correctly interpret the Bible, to see the systematic unity of the Scriptures, and to appropriately apply the Word of God to our lives today -- then we are in a position to develop a truly Biblical Worldview ! A Biblical Worldview is equivalent to a personal, practical systematic theology for everyday life.

Resource List for Applying the Scriptures Ranked in order beginning with the least complicated and least costly resources in each category.

Resources for Applying the Bible Today 1.Basic Bible Interpretation (Chapter 12), Roy Zuck 2.Understanding and Applying the Bible (Chapters 19-20), Robertson McQuilkin 3.Hermeneutics (Chapter 8), Henry Virkler 4.Interpreting the Bible (Chapter 17), A. Berkeley Mickelsen Resources for Dealing with Bible Difficulties 1.Understanding and Applying the Bible (Chapter 17), Robertson McQuilkin 2.Hard Sayings of the Bible, Kaiser, Davids, Bruce, and Brauch 3.New International Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties, Gleason Archer 4.When Critics Ask: A Popular Handbook on Bible Difficulties, Geisler and Howe 5.Alleged Discrepancies of the Bible, John Haley Resources for Understanding Systematic Theology 1.Understanding and Applying the Bible (Chapter 16), Robertson McQuilkin 2.A Survey of Bible Doctrine, Charles Ryrie 3.Basic Theology, Charles Ryrie 4.Major Bible Themes, Chafer and Walvoord 5.Lectures in Systematic Theology, Henry Thiessen

Endnotes

1 Robertson McQuilkin, Understanding and Applying the Bible, 242.

2 Adapted from McQuilkin, 242-247.

3 McQuilkin, 220.

4 McQuilkin, 223-224.

5 McQuilkin, 232.

6 Ibid.

7 McQuilkin, 233.

8 Ibid.

9 McQuilkin, 234.

10 Henry Virkler, Hermeneutics, 220.

11 Roy Zuck, Basic Bible Interpretation, 279.

12 Zuck, 282.

13 Virkler, 86.

14 Virkler, 224.

15 Zuck, 92-94.

16 Zuck, 285, 287.

07 - Exercise for Handling a Bible Difficulty

Handling a Bible Difficulty Women Saved Through Childbearing

1 Timothy 2:15

Here is an example of a Scripture passage that is difficult to interpret, so it is important to apply the basic principles of interpretation that we have learned to determine the intended meaning of this passage. Some of these steps include:

Identify special or significant words in this passage. Define these words, and determine how they are related to each other within this sentence. Outline this verse to see the relationships of the phrases.

Look at the general purpose of the book of 1 Timothy, as well as the overall flow of thought of Paul as he writes this section.

Determine how 1 Timothy 2:15 is connected with other points within this flow of thought, as well as how it is related to other passages in the Scriptures.

e-Sword Exercise for Researching a Difficult Bible Passage 1 Timothy 2:15(KJV)
Notwithstanding she shall be saved in childbearing, if they continue in faith and charity and holiness with sobriety.

- Look at this verse in the e-Sword Bible window. This exercise uses the King James Version (KJV+). Make sure to select the KJV+ tab in your Bible window.

- Use the mouse to hover over the green Strong Concordance number for the word "Notwithstanding." What is the Strong number for this word? _____. What Greek word is represented by "notwithstanding" ? _____

- Click on this green Strong number and look at the Dictionary window in e-Sword. Which tabs have a small blue&white (i) information icon displayed now? _____

- Click on the "Thayer" tab in your Dictionary window. What are the possible meanings for the word you clicked on?

_____, _____, _____, _____

- Check the box below to indicate what "part of speech" this little word represents?

☐ Noun ☐ Verb ☐ Adjective ☐ Adverb ☐ Preposition ☐ Conjunction

- HINT: This is a connecting word, which indicates that this verse cannot be properly interpreted without determining how it is connected to what came before it in the text.

· In your Bible window, notice that the next word with a green Strong number is “saved.” This indicates that the entire phrase (she shall be saved) is translating a single Greek word. What is the Strong number for “saved” ? _____

· With your mouse, hover over the green number and see what the possible meanings are for this word according to Strong’s Concordance:

· Click on this green Strong number and look at the “Thayer” tab in your Dictionary window.

What are some of the other meanings and definitions described in this tab?

· Check the box below to indicate what “part of speech” this word represents?

☐ Noun ☐ Verb ☐ Adjective ☐ Adverb ☐ Preposition ☐ Conjunction

· It would be very helpful to determine the tense, voice, mood, person, and number for this word. One way to do this is if you have in your Bible window a GNT-TR+ tab. Even if you are not able to read Greek, you can see the Greek characters for this word in the Thayer or Strong Dictionary tabs and find the corresponding word in the GNT-TR+ tab. In small green letters you will see the Strong number for this Greek word, and in small blue letters you will see the grammatical form of this word: σωθησεται4982V-FPI-3S

This tells you that this is a Verb in the Future tense, Passive voice, Indicative mood, 3rd person, Singular number.

· With this information you can see why the translators render this Greek word as

“she shall be saved” If you click on the “Compare” tab in your Bible window you can see how some of the other Bible version have translated this same verse. Some use “will be saved” while others use “will be kept safe” or “will be preserved.” All of these would be valid possible meanings for this word (according to your research in Thayer and Strong).

· One question that you should answer at some point is “Who does the third person singular pronoun refer to?”

You will need to go back into the previous context of this passage in order to determine this (HINT: 1 Timothy 2:14).

· The next word which has a green Strong number in this verse (back in the KJV+ tab) is the word “in”

What is the Strong number for this word? _____

- According to Strong and Thayer, what are the possible meanings for this word?

-
- What would probably be a better translation for this word (rather than “in”)? _____

- Check the box below to indicate what “part of speech” this word represents?

☐ Noun ☐ Verb ☐ Adjective ☐ Adverb ☐ Preposition ☐ Conjunction

- The next word which has a green Strong number in this verse is “childbearing” - what is the Strong number for this word? _____

What are the possible meanings for this word?

-
- You should determine how the prepositional phrase “through childbearing” functions in this sentence. Which of the previous words is this phrase associated with - what does it describe?

-
- The next word with a green Strong number in this verse is “if” - what is the Strong number for this word? _____. This is a conditional word, indicating that the fulfillment of the first part of the verse may depend on meeting the condition in the second part of the verse. (HINT: This is a 3rd class conditional clause in the Greek, indicating that which is probable or likely to occur in the future.)

- The next word with a green Strong number is “continue” - what is the Strong number for this word? _____.

What are some of the possible meanings for this word, according to Strong and Thayer?

-
-
- Check the box below to indicate what “part of speech” this word represents?

☐ Noun ☐ Verb ☐ Adjective ☐ Adverb ☐ Preposition ☐ Conjunction

- It would be very helpful to determine the tense, voice, mood, person, and number for this word. In the GNT-TR+ tab locate the Greek word that shows the “parsing” of this verb. In small green letters you will see the Strong number for this Greek word, and in small blue letters you will see the grammatical form of this word: μεῖνωσιν3306V-AAS-3P

This tells you that this is a Verb in the Aorist tense, Active voice, Subjunctive mood, 3rd person, Plural number.

- One question that you should answer at some point is “Who does the third person plural pronoun refer to?” It seems unusual that the writer would switch the number from singular to plural in the middle of the verse. You may need to go back to the previous context in order to discover another 3rd person plural word that could be the referent (HINT: 1 Timothy 2:9-10).

· The next word with a green Strong number is “in” - what is the Strong number for this word?
_____.

Is this the same Strong number as you found for the previous “in” of this verse? _____.

According to the “Thayer” tab in your Dictionary window, what are some of the possible meanings for this word?

· The next five words all have Strong numbers. Two of these words are connecting words (and), while the other three are very important terms which deserve individual word studies of their own. What are these three terms:

Word	Strong number	Possible Meanings
------	---------------	-------------------

Faith	_____	_____
-------	-------	-------

Charity	_____	_____
---------	-------	-------

Holiness	_____	_____
----------	-------	-------

· You should determine how the prepositional phrase “in faith and charity and holiness” functions in this sentence.

Which of the previous words is this phrase associated with - what does it describe?

· The next word with a green Strong number is “with” - what is the Strong number for this word?
_____.

What are some of the possible meanings of this word?

· Check the box below to indicate what “part of speech” this word represents?

☐ Noun ☐ Verb ☐ Adjective ☐ Adverb ☐ Preposition ☐ Conjunction

· The next word with a green Strong number is “sobriety” - what is the Strong number for this word? _____.

What are some of the possible meanings of this word?

· You should determine how the prepositional phrase “with sobriety” functions in this sentence.

Which of the previous words is this phrase associated with - what does it describe?

· Determine where else in 1 Timothy this word was used by the writer. With your mouse, hover over the green Strong number for the word “sobriety” in 1 Timothy 2:15 and RIGHT-click. On the small menu that appears, click on “Quick search on 4997” and then click on

“1 Timothy” to see other instances of this word in this book. Which other passage in 1 Timothy used this same word? _____.

What was the writer describing in that passage when he used the term sobriety (self-restraint, self-control)?

· What are some of your unanswered interpretive questions at this point in your study?

How does this passage connect with what went before? (use of the word “notwithstanding”). Which meaning for the word “saved” was intended?_____ Why was there a switch between third person singular (she) and third person plural (they)?_ Why was childbearing included in this verse?_____ Why is a woman’s “sobriety” or self-restraint being emphasized in this verse?_____

Looking at the Context Within First Timothy

· First of all, it is important to identify the purpose of the book of First Timothy. Why did the apostle Paul write this book? You could identify the purpose by reading all the way through First Timothy and looking for a clear statement by Paul of his purpose (HINT: 1 Timothy 3:15). You might also check with some of your Bible resources such as a Bible Handbook, Bible Dictionary, or Study Bible introduction. In the e-Sword Dictionary window you could type “Timothy” in the small lookup field to see what is contained in the Fausset, ISBE, and Smith tabs. Based on your research, what was Paul’s purpose, and what were some of the problems he wanted Timothy to deal with in the church at Ephesus?

· What is the first topic that Paul addressed in chapter 2? _____ (1 Timothy 2:1-2)

· If they followed Paul's instructions in vv. 1-2, then God would be pleased. Paul then includes a brief comment about God Himself and His plan for salvation (1 Timothy 2:4 uses the same word *sozo* that you found in your study of 1 Timothy 2:15, so there is a connection). Summarize how Paul describes God's method for saving people (1 Timothy 2:5-7).

· Paul then dealt with issues of proper conduct in the church, especially in the public meetings of the church. Notice the order of the groups Paul addressed. Which gender was addressed first? _____ (1 Timothy 2:8)

Which gender was addressed second? _____ (1 Timothy 2:9)

· What were the issues of "improper conduct in the church" addressed to women (1 Timothy 2:9-12)

(HINT: notice the word *sobriety/self-restraint*, as well as the violation of proper authority)

· Notice the Scriptural reasons that Paul listed for addressing the men first, and for specifying that authority within the church falls on the shoulders of qualified male leadership.

What biblical event did Paul refer to in 1 Timothy 2:13? _____

· In the original account of this event, had Adam already been given primary responsibility and authority for carrying out specific duties within the creation? _____

· What biblical event did Paul refer to in 1 Timothy 2:14? _____

· Does the fact that only Eve was deceived mean that men can never be deceived? _____

(In this second biblical event, it is clear that Adam deliberately sinned with full knowledge, but that is only an explanation of what happened during that event).

· In the original account of this second biblical event, what were the consequences for both men and women?

· What relationship does childbearing (1 Timothy 2:15) have to this second biblical event that Paul listed in verse 14 ?

·According to the wider context of the entire Bible, how is any person “saved” according to God’s eternal plan? For example, the same word Paul used for “saved” is also used by Paul in Ephesians 2:5 and Ephesians 2:8. Express in your own words God’s plan for human salvation:

· Can any woman be saved in a different way than what you described above? _____

· From what Paul said about women in 1 Timothy 2:9-14, it might give a negative impression of a woman's place in God's purpose for the church. This is obviously not an impression that Paul would want to leave in the minds of his readers. So Paul adds verse 15 at the conclusion to his paragraph in order to affirm that women do have a place in God's purposes.

Insights from Commentaries

Remember that the words of these commentators are not on the same level as the inspired Word that we have recorded for us in the Scriptures. Whenever you read the insights of commentators be sure to carefully evaluate them in light of all of the detailed study you have done yourself.

· In the e-Sword Bible window, click on the verse number for 1 Timothy 2:15. Notice which tabs in the Commentary window have a small blue&white (i) information icon displayed.

· Click on the JFB tab (Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset and David Brown: Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible). In addition to "by means of" what is another way that the word "THROUGH" can be understood? (see the first paragraph)

· In this same tab, what insights are provided about the use of the words faith, charity, and holiness? (By "essential way to salvation" they mean the essential conduct of one who is saved.)

· In the tab for BARNES you will notice that there is a great deal of information. Barnes deals with some of the different views on this verse, and he comes to some important conclusions regarding its meaning. Look for the words that begin with, "The true meaning, it seems to me, has been suggested by Calvin" Beneath this, you will find three points and a concluding paragraph on the meaning of this phrase.

· Notice that not all of the thoughts of the commentators are equally valuable. In many cases you will find no help, and in some cases you will find more hindrance than help. When many of the commentators disagree regarding the meaning of a passage, this is a clear sign that we should not be dogmatic about an interpretation.

· Another resource for "Bible difficulties" (not in e-Sword) has this to say about 1 Timothy 2:15.

“1Timothy 2:15 is the conclusion to the entire paragraph. In 1 Timothy 2:9-14 the specific instructions to women are restrictive and negative. Verse 15 begins with the word “but” (or better, “yet”), and what is said is apparently intended as a positive affirmation. The various restrictions imposed on women are now qualified.” (Hard Sayings of the Bible, Kaiser, Davids, Bruce, and Brauch, 671)

- You might consider getting a book specifically on the role of women in church ministry. For example, *Women and Ministry* by Dan Doriani devotes an entire chapter to 1 Timothy 2:15. Doriani affirms that, although women should not have a position of authority - in the sense of a formal office in church leadership - they do have an important ministry.

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