

Getting the Most Out of Your Bible Study

STEP #2: INTERPRETATION

After observation, you have before you a list of somewhat disjointed and seemingly unrelated facts and details. What does all this stuff mean? This is where step two comes in. Although you cannot obey what you have never observed, you cannot obey “properly” what you have not interpreted “properly.”

I. Be Very Careful**A. You are not the **first** to study this Book**

- Be cautious if you think that you have discovered something that you think no one has ever seen before. Faithful followers of the Lord have studied this book for thousands of years. All of our conclusions should be compared with the history of doctrine.

B. Some Things to **Avoid:****1. Misreading the Text.**

- This is why observation is so important. The more time you spend in observation the more clearly you will see the text for what it really says and the less time you will need to spend on interpretation.

2. Distorting the Text.

- There is no problem admitting that you do not understand something even after hours of studying. Be careful not to twist the text into saying something you are unsure of just so you have an “interpretation.” 2 Peter 3:16

3. Subjectivism

- Use your imagination, but not at the expense of clear thinking. The truth of God’s word is not subjective. God used a human author to express one clear meaning to an original audience. The goal of interpretation is to understand what God intended that audience to understand and that is not subjective...no “well, that is your interpretation.”

4. Relativism

- The intended meaning of God’s word (“authorial intent”) does not change based on who is reading or the time period in which they live.

5. Overconfidence

- You must approach your study of God’s word with humility. You are studying the very Revelation of God.

Getting the Most Out of Your Bible Study

- “The Bible Consists of occasional documents, historical, didactic and liturgical, all proclaiming in various ways what God has done, is doing and will do. Each document and each utterance within the document, like Jesus Christ and each of His utterances, is anchored in a particular historical situation – this particularity marks all the Christian Revelation – and to discern within these particularities truths from God for universal application is the interpreter’s major tasks”
 - Packer, J.I. ‘What did the Cross Achieve? The Logic of Penal Substitution’, *Tyndale Bulletin* 25 (1974), pp. 3 – 45.
- Virtually every cult has been started because of the abuse of one or more of the above pitfalls to interpretation.

II. What Type of **Literature** is This? (news paper example)

- A. Apocalyptic - Revelation
- B. Biography – parts of the Gospels; parts of Genesis, etc.
- C. Epistolary – most of the NT; Paul’s writings; 1 & 2 Peter, etc.
- D. Narrative – much of the Old Testament
- E. Oratory – large sections of Acts and 1 Corinthians
- F. Parable – the Gospels
- G. Poetry – Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon
- H. Prophecy – Isaiah – Malachi
- I. Proverb – Proverbs
- J. Wisdom Literature – Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, some Psalms
- K. Other sub-types...

III. The Five “C’s” of Interpretation

A. **Content**

- These are all the pieces of the puzzle you have collected during your observation.

B. Context (“War With” example)

1. **Literary** Context

- What type of literature is this?

Getting the Most Out of Your Bible Study

2. **Historical** Context
 - When is this event taking place?
 3. **Cultural** Context
 - Are there any unique cultural considerations to take into account?
 4. **Geographic** Context
 - Where is this event taking place?
 5. **Theological** Context
 - What does this passage directly teach about God, His relationship to man and/or man's relationship to God? How does this passage relate to the rest of Scripture (Systematic Theology)?
- C. Comparison**
- What else does Scripture teach on this subject?
- D. Culture**
- Remember that the events that are recorded in Scripture took place from 2,000 to 6,000+ years ago. There is a huge time and cultural gap between us and those events.
- E. Consultation**
- Commentaries can be very helpful or distracting. We will spend the next class discussing tools.
- IV. Interpreting the **Figurative**
- There are fewer figurative parts of Scripture than some people will lead you to believe.
- A. Use the literal sense unless there is a very good reason not to.
 - Song of Solomon (This is not referring to Christ and the church!)
 - B. Use the figurative sense when the passage tells you to do so.
 - Genesis 37; 41 (Joseph's and Pharaoh's dreams) – most of the time the context will give you the meaning of the figure, you don't have to go looking for it.
 - C. Use the figurative sense if a literal meaning is impossible or absurd.
 - Revelation 1:16 (Is there really a sword coming out of His mouth?)
 - D. Use the figurative sense if the literal meaning would involve something immoral.
 - John 6:53 – 55 (Is Jesus requiring His followers to be cannibals?)
 - E. Use the figurative sense if the expression is an obvious figure of speech.

Getting the Most Out of Your Bible Study

- Proverbs 11:22 (These will often be similes or metaphors.)
- F. Use the figurative sense if a literal interpretation is contrary to the context and scope of the passage.
- Revelation 5:1 – 5 (Is this a literal lion? Here too the context is your best guide, the figure is often interpreted for you.)

PRACTICE FOR NEXT WEEK:

1. What does the sword of Revelation 1:16 represent?
2. What is the general principle and the specific examples given in Matthew 6:1ff?
3. What is the cause(s) and what is the effect(s) of Psalm 1?
4. Are the 1,000 years of Revelation 20:1 – 7 figurative or literal? Why?