

How to Read the Bible



Why Read the Bible

2 Timothy 2:15, 2 Timothy 3:16-17, Hebrews 4:12, John 17:17

Need for Interpretation

God speaks to us through the Bible by what He said to the people who were being addressed at the time.

He doesn't speak directly to us in the Bible – very important.

He speaks to us in the Bible but only by speaking to the people of that time.

A trivial example Romans 16:16

Greet one another with a holy kiss. (NIV)

Paul writing in a culture where a kiss was the accepted method of greeting.

It was the “holy” that was important – they were to always greet one another with warm, Christian affection

In a culture like ours where a handshake or a hug is the accepted greeting then we are “To greet one another with a holy handshake or hug”

The Bible must be interpreted

Group Exercise

Even contemporary comments or writings need to be interpreted

1. If someone said to you “*I would love you to come round to mine on Saturday for dinner*”, what time of day would you arrive?
[Social background]
2. You invited someone round to your home and they said they would come. They know you have a few pets and have made it clear they don't like moggies. You have a budgie, a canary, a white mouse, a dog, a cat, a hamster, a snake and a husband. Which would you keep locked away when your friend came?
[Geographical background]
3. What is meant by the statement “Pasties are better than pies”?
[Context and Social background]

How much more does an ancient document, from foreign cultures need to be interpreted

4. Genesis 43:30 says “*And Joseph made haste; for his bowels did yearn upon his brother*” (KJV)
What does this mean?!?!?
The Hebrew text actually uses the word that is literally translated to “Bowels”!
5. Some would say that interpretation is a waste of time – “I just do what it says!” Really?
Jesus said in Matthew 5:29a “*If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away.*” (NIV).

Interpretation is essential!

You will need tools and the first choice is which Bible to use.

Types of Bibles

Our Bibles are translations from Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic manuscripts.

Different translations

Two main types

- **Literal, word for word translations**

Words have meanings within the context of the society they were written in – little interpretation - so this kind of translation can be difficult to understand

- **Paraphrase translations**

Sentences or paragraphs are interpreted so the general meaning to the modern reader is brought out - easier to understand but involves interpretation by the translator that may not necessarily be correct - the reader would have no way of checking.

Example - Romans 13:14

The English Standard Version - literal translation

But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

The Good News Bible - paraphrase

But take up the weapons of the Lord Jesus Christ, and stop paying attention to your sinful nature and satisfying its desires.

Suggested Toolkit

- **A good basic Bible** – New International Version
- **A literal Bible** – English Standard Version, New American Standard Bible
- **A paraphrase Bible** – Message, Good News Bible, Living Bible
- **A Bible Dictionary/Encyclopedia** – New Bible Dictionary, Illustrated Bible Dictionary - IVP
- **A whole Bible Commentary** – New Bible Commentary - IVP

e-Sword Bible Program – contains Bibles, Dictionaries and Commentaries – and it's FREE!
(When Installing select *Custom* option, then *Next*, then *Install*)



So, we've got the tools but how do we go about understanding what God is saying to us through a passage in the Bible?

It goes without saying that we approach the task of attempting to understand a passage of the Bible under the covering of prayer

Pray first – seeking God's help in understanding the passage

Prayerfully read the passage and also its surrounding context in your main Bible a few times till you get a feel for it

Prayerfully read the passage in a literal translation and then a paraphrase

You are now ready to interpret the passage - this process is called Hermeneutics.

OK, a big horrible word but it is easy to understand!

Hermeneutics

Definition

Simply, the theory of biblical interpretation or the process whereby the Bible speaks to us today

This consists of 3 tasks:

1. Exegesis

So our first task is to determine what it meant to them then

A text can never mean to us what it could never have meant to its author or his or her original readers

- **Historical context**

- The time and culture of the author and his readers?***

- Tools:* Bible Dictionary/Encyclopedia or paraphrase Bible

- Matt 20:1-16: a denarius was the going rate for a days pay

- God will not deal with anyone unjustly.

- Even the labourers who worked all day were not ripped off – they got what they deserved.

- The others, however, got more than they deserved – this is called grace.

- So, if we see someone receiving more grace than you, better gifts and talents etc, you are not to be envious and complain

- So in understanding the time and the culture of this passage we have a better understanding of what the passage is saying to us.

- The occasion and purpose of the author?***

- Tools:* The Bible book itself, or perhaps a Bible Dictionary/Encyclopedia

- What was going on at the time to cause the author to write

- Sometimes found in the book itself if you look carefully

- What caused Paul to write 1 Corinthians? (1:10-11)

- **Literary context**

- What is the point the author is making?***

- Tools:* The surrounding verses.

- Words have meaning within sentences and sentences within paragraphs etc.

- Need to read a passage in the context of the surrounding verses and chapters to seek the development of the authors thought.

- If your passage starts with “Therefore” then you need to back up

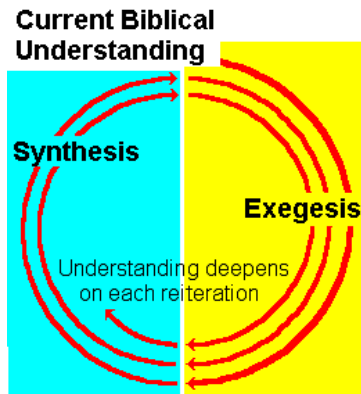
2. Synthesis

The Bible is God's word and as God doesn't change or lie then we expect a unified message throughout.

So, if during the *Exegesis* stage we interpret a passage and this interpretation conflicts with our current Biblical understanding then we may need to review our exegesis, our current Biblical understanding or both.

If this does not resolve the conflict we probably need to seek help and refer to a good commentary or ask a church leader.

- **Hermeneutical Spiral**



Eg.

- Romans 3:28 For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.
- James 2:24 You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.

Tools: May require a Bible Commentary

3. Application

Whenever we share similar particular life situations with the people referenced in a passage, God's Word to us is the same as His word to them

- **Considerations**

- **Progressive revelation**
Jewish animal sacrifice system → Jesus, Lamb of God, slain for the sins of the world.
Jewish nation, covenant people of God → Church, covenant people of God.
- **Cultural aspects**
Jesus commanded His disciples to make disciples and that applies to us. The way they did it, however, may not be effective in our culture and we need to find our own way of doing it.

This is a critical stage – to apply the Bible effectively we must be aware of our own culture.

Tools: May require a Bible Commentary

Summary

The interpretive process involves:

Exegesis – what did the passage mean to the people it was written to

Synthesis – does our understanding of the passage agree with our overall understanding of the Bible?

Application – what does this passage mean for me today?

So, to understand and apply the Bible we must be aware of

- the culture of the place and time the passage was written
- our own culture, today