

Studying Logically

- An academic study of Scripture does not ensure a proper interpretation.
- While rigorous study does not guarantee right results, it does not rule out hard work and a logical approach to Scripture.
- Studying Logically is not only helpful, it is necessary and commanded:

2 Tim. 2:15 // Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.

- God calls you to “do your best.” Laziness is inexcusable.
- God calls us to love Him with all our heart, soul and minds. (Matt. 22:37)
- It is an act of worship to use our minds to understand His thoughts, which in turn will lead us to love Him even more.
- God is speaking directly to us through His word, we must studying prayerfully, obediently and diligently.
- As Christians, we claim to base our lives upon the teaching of the Bible. But what if we misunderstand that teaching?

The fact of the matter is that we all misunderstand certain passages of Scripture. If we all understood the Bible perfectly, we would all agree on every point of doctrine. Clearly this is not the case. There are many factors that lead us to misunderstand what the Bible is saying: our own assumptions, blindly following the views of people who have been influential in our lives, our sinful desire to do our own thing, etc. All of these factors are only intensified when we don't pay close attention to what the Bible is actually saying, rather than what we think it must be saying. It is good for us to keep in mind some general principles for interpreting Scripture.

Consider Context

- Context is the set of circumstances or facts that surround a particular event or situation. (that which goes with the text)

Every text belongs to a context. Every chapter, paragraph, sentence, and word derives meaning from its relationship to the words, sentences, paragraphs, and chapters around it. This is true in reading ordinary books, and it is certainly true in reading the Bible. (The context of a word determines the meaning. [Example: *ship*] To ship somewhere or large boat?)

- Words have meaning based on the words around them.
- Reading words in their context is second nature to us.
- The past or present tense depends on the context, we automatically choose the appropriate definition or tense based on the context.

- In order to understand a particular word, verse, chapter, or book, we need to consider it in light of its context.

1) Who?

- Who wrote it?
- Who originally read it?
- Who are the main characters?

2) What?

- What is happening in the text?
- What is wrong with the picture?
- What is the author saying?

3) Where?

- Where is the writer?
- Where are the original readers?
- Where is the text taking place?

4) When?

- When was it written?
- When did the events take place?

5) Why?

- Why is the author writing this?
- Why is this included in Scripture?
- Why did the events happen the way they did?
- Why did the author say what he said?

- Too often, verses are read and quoted in isolation. While this is not necessarily wrong, it greatly increases the chances of misinterpretation.
- When studying Scripture, think apple rather than orange.
 - ORANGE: When you eat an orange, you break it into isolated pieces and then eat the pieces individually. Whenever we read a verse, we should be mindful that we are taking a thought (a “bite”) from a larger story. Always keep in mind that every verse is connected to a chapter, a book, and the entire Bible.
 - APPLE: Typically, when you eat an apple, you take a bite out of the whole fruit.
- One of the best things we can do to understand context is to read the Bible in its entirety.
- Whatever approach you take to reading the Bible, the more often you read it, the better you will understand the whole story.

1. Think about the way you tend to study the Bible. Would you say that you make an effort to seek out what the Bible is actually saying? Do you pay attention to the context? If so, how has this helped you? If not, how do you think this might change the way you read the Bible?

Know the Difference between Interpretation & Application

- One the most common mistake made in Bible interpretation is when people focus too much on “what this verse means to me.”
- Often this type of interpretation is made with little to no study and are heavily influenced by opinion and desire.
- Many times, the various interpretations are incompatible with one another.
- The focus here is not on what God is saying through the Bible but on what each person thinks the verse means personally to them.
- God has a message to get across, and we all need to work together in order to examine God’s words and find out what He is really saying to us.
- Interpretation is asking what the passage is saying and what it means.
- Application is applying that meaning to our specific situation.

- Ultimately, each passage has one meaning, but it might have many different applications.
- For example, in Matthew 22:39, Jesus quoted Leviticus 19:18, which says, “**You shall love your neighbor as yourself.**” The meaning is pretty easy to grasp: we need to love the people whom God has placed around us. But how do we apply that truth to our lives?

2. In your own words, why is it important to distinguish between interpretation and application?

Find The Plain Meaning

- Sometimes our personal agendas or assumptions divert us from what God is saying in a biblical passage.

We need to learn to take Scripture at face value. While some sections of the Bible are difficult to understand (2 Pet.3:16), so much of the Bible is easily understood. When we read that “those who are in the flesh cannot please God” (Rom. 8:8), we will have to carefully study the verse and its context to decide what it means to be “in the flesh,” but the plain meaning of the verse is clear: God does not want us to be in the flesh.

- It might seem more “spiritual” to try to find some deeper meaning behind the text, but what could be more spiritual than simply taking God at His word?

The Bible is a fascinating book. It is the communication of the Creator of the universe to His people. God wrote the Bible using human language, in words that we understand and use every day. He chose to communicate through a book, and He obviously has the ability to communicate His message clearly.

3. In your own words, why is it important to look for the plain meaning of each passage rather than seeking out a deeper meaning?

4. Would you say that your study of the Bible is focused on finding the plain meaning of each passage? Why or why not?

Taking the Bible Literally

- There is an old statement that is worth repeating here: if the literal sense makes sense, seek no other sense.
 - We should look for the plain meaning of the words of Scripture.
 - We need to allow the context to suggest whether that verse should be taken as a literal statement, a rhetorical question, a figure of speech, etc.
- Accepting the Bible as literal truth does not mean that we interpret every passage literally.
- When we read the Bible, we find many places where the author uses metaphors, parables, poems, prophecies, and other literary devices. For example:

John 10:9 // I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture.

- Taking the Bible literally means that we will take the Scriptures at face value, and when the context suggests that the author is using a figure of speech or some sort of poetic or prophetic imagery, then we will follow the normal rules of human language and interpret the passage accordingly.
- Don't misunderstand—this isn't always a simple task
- We will often disagree over which specific passages are speaking literally and which ones are using rhetorical devices.
- This means that we need to be gracious as we discuss the Bible. There is room for discussion and exploration—in fact, it glorifies God when we humbly and patiently examine the Bible together.
- The point is simply this: take God's words at face value and do what He tells you to do.

5. *Do you have a tendency to interpret the Bible allegorically or figuratively? If so, why do you think you tend to do this?*

Study the Grammatical Context

God used human language to write the Bible. He led human authors to use human words and human grammar in order to record His truth. So it only makes sense to pay attention to the grammar of the Bible. This doesn't mean that you need to be a grammatical expert to read the Bible (though God does give these people to the church to guide the rest of us), but we should pay attention to how the words in the Bible are being used.

It's always helpful when we come to difficult passages to ask these types of questions:

- Who is doing the action here? (Find the subject)
- What action is the actor performing? (Find the verb)
- How are the actor and the action described? (Find the adjectives and adverbs)
- Who or what is being acted upon? (Find the direct and indirect objects)

Most of the time, we do this sort of analysis automatically, without even thinking about what we're doing. (You just did it with the previous sentence, and now you're doing it again.) But when you encounter a passage that seems difficult, try breaking it down and examining what is really going on with each sentence. God's words are worth evaluating at this level.

Study the Historical Context

The historical setting of a passage will often shed light on what the passage means. Sometimes this will require outside resources, like a study Bible, Bible dictionary, or commentary. But many times the historical insights can be found in the Bible itself. For example, much of the Old Testament consists of detailed historical accounts. And many New Testament books give historical insights—particularly the Gospels and the book of Acts.

Consider just one example of how the historical setting can help us understand the Bible.

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

People love it because they interpret it as God saying He will keep us from harm and bless us. But is that really what Jeremiah intended to communicate to us?

If we look at the historical context, we find that Jeremiah was writing to Jewish exiles in Babylon. They had gone into captivity as punishment for their lack of faithfulness to God. Jeremiah prophesied that they would be in captivity for seventy years, so they should settle in and seek to bless Babylon while they were there. And then comes Jeremiah 29:11. God promised that He did indeed have a plan for His people, and He would restore them to the land of Israel after their days of exile were over.

Although the Holy Spirit can use this scripture to speak directly into our lives, revealing the nature and character of God and the relationship He has with His children, the historical context reveals that Jeremiah 29:11 is not a blank-check promise from God that nothing bad will ever happen to any of us today. The historical context does not always affect the meaning of a passage, but we must always consider who the biblical authors were addressing and why.

6. In your own words, explain why paying attention to the grammatical and historical context is important. How should these concepts shape your study of the Bible?

Let Go of Your Baggage

- As important as it is to pay attention to the context of the passages we read, the greatest danger in biblical interpretation comes from our own “baggage.”
- Life experiences can also taint the way we read the Bible.
- Our experiences have an impact on our desires, which in turn affect our interpretations.
- When we read the Bible, we need to do everything we can to avoid making assumptions about what the Bible is saying.
- Let the Bible speak for itself.
- We also have been heavily affected by our life experiences, but the more we let go of our baggage and ask God to speak directly to us through His Word, the more we will find God’s truth transforming our minds and actions, and the better we will understand the mind of God.

7. What would it mean for you to read the Bible with an awareness of your own baggage and a willingness to get rid of those assumptions for the sake of understanding God’s truth more clearly?

A Note on Application

Don't forget what you read in the session. Accurately interpreting the Bible is not the final step. The purpose of reading and interpreting the Bible is obedience and fellowship with God. If we interpret Scripture perfectly, yet fail to live in accordance with what we read, we are fooling ourselves (James 1:22). God has given us the precious gift of the Bible so that we will be transformed by its truth, becoming more like Him and growing in our love for Him.

8. In light of what you have thought through in this session, how do you need to change your approach to reading and studying the Bible?