

Discovery Class

Session 5 of 9: Interpretation, Part One: Context

Clayton Valley Church

Session Goals

- *Say what interpretation is, and name the three parts of the process it follows.*
- *Reconstruct the setting of a book: author, date, addressees, purpose, theme.*
- *Read a passage inside its widening circles: sentence, paragraph, chapter, book.*

B. Interpretation

Introduction

Definition: Finding out what the author meant by what he said, and putting that meaning into contemporary equivalent expressions.

Process: Literal, Grammatical, Historical and Cultural.

- Literal. The words carry their normal sense in their normal usage.
- Grammatical. The words stand in relationships to each other that carry meaning.
- Historical and cultural. The words were spoken by someone, to someone, at a particular time and place.

We take the last two out of order. This session hones in on the historical and cultural part and next session will dive into the grammatical part.

Method

1. Context

Note: This step requires a lot of reading, more than the other steps do.

- The Bible, first and most.
- History.
- Books written about both.

Concern: “I read poorly.” “I don’t like to read.” “What should I do?”

- Do the best you can.
- Let’s pursue direction not perfection.

a. Historical Context

Put yourself in their sandals.

(1) Setting

(a) **Author.** Who wrote it, and what do we know about him?

(b) Date. Include both: the period the book covers, and the point at which it was written.

(c) Addressees. Who received it, and what was their situation?

(d) Purpose. Why was it written? What was the occasion?

(e) Theme. What is its main, unified, primary message?

Note: You want to put yourself into the historical setting of the book.

Table activity. Work through the five elements of Setting. Feel free to use resources on hand. Study Bibles welcome.

3 John 1

The elder to the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth.

Some Suggested Resources

- Zondervan Illustrated Bible Background Commentary, edited by Clinton Arnold.
- Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes, by Kenneth Bailey.
- Backgrounds of Early Christianity, by Everett Ferguson.

(2) Culture

(a) Spatial (Geography)

Where is this happening, how far is it from anywhere else, and what did it take to get there? Distance, terrain, and travel time do real interpretive work, and 3 John depends on them. The traveling brothers in verses 5 through 8 are on roads that were slow and dangerous, staying in households because inns were few and mostly disreputable.

Additional Suggested Resources

- A Bible atlas: Eerdmans, Baker, or MacMillan.
- Blue Letter Bible: www.blueletterbible.org

(b) Social

Note: Create the culture in your thinking.

- Material culture: tools, dwellings, garments, weapons, money, food.
- Social culture: customs, practices, rites, the ordinary rules everybody knew and nobody wrote down.

3 John 5–8

Beloved, it is a faithful thing you do in all your efforts for these brothers, strangers as they are, who testified to your love before the church. You will do well to send them on their journey in a manner worthy of God.

For they have gone out for the sake of the name, accepting nothing from the Gentiles. Therefore we ought to support people like these, that we may be fellow workers for the truth.

Read that with first-century hospitality in view and the letter changes weight. Receiving a traveling teacher meant food, a bed, and provision for the next leg of the journey. Refusing him did not mean an awkward moment. It meant he did not eat and could not travel. Diotrophes' refusal in verse 10 was not mere rudeness, but an attempt to put these gospel workers in danger.

i) Problems

a) Their culture is so far removed from ours.

b) Our culture is so ingrained that we do not notice it operating. We have blind spots precisely where we feel most certain, because the things a culture teaches best are the things it never says out loud.

c) Decide principle or custom.

Principle = Timeless truth in all ages.

Custom = no relevance beyond immediate cultural context.

ii) Dangers

a) We can bring too much of our own culture to the text, and end up making the culture interpret the text rather than letting the text interpret itself in light of the culture.

Here is a familiar case. Philippians 4:13 turns up on t-shirts, wristbands, and locker room walls. Read through our own culture it becomes a slogan for personal achievement: win the game, pass the exam, hit the sales target, and God supplies the strength to pull it off.

Philippians 4:11–13

Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound.

In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

Remember, Paul is in a Roman prison. He tells us plainly what the all things are, and it is not a list of victories. It is contentment. Brought low or abounding, well fed or hungry, plenty or need, and the strength he is given is strength to be content in either. Our culture supplied a meaning the text never gave, and the two verses just above say so.

iii) Solution

a) Examine the Bible itself for what is plainly custom. Dietary laws, language, dress, and money are the easy cases. We do not have to eat their food, speak their language, wear their clothes, or use their coins. Cultural institutions are harder.

Colossians 1:25

of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known,

(2) Developed

Notes: reading across the stages, three things are true at once.

- Some commands continue.
- Some commands stop.
- Some commands are newly given.

And one thing never moves. Salvation is always the same, by grace through faith, in every age, for every person who has ever been saved.

Question: Does this mean that God has changed?

No. The answer is one verse.

Hebrews 13:8

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

God's character does not change. His dealings with people do. We do not bring lambs to the altar today, and the reason is not that God's holiness relaxed. It is that the one sacrifice every one of those lambs pointed to has come, and been offered, and been accepted.

There is an opposite error, and it is just as common. Some say everything in the Bible applies to me literally and directly, exactly as written. What then do we do with Deuteronomy 8:4, where Israel's clothes did not wear out and their feet did not swell for forty years in the wilderness? Nehemiah 9:21 says the same thing.

Note: That is a true account of what God did for a particular people at a particular moment. It is not a promise about your shoes.

Question: How do we determine whether a given Old Testament passage applies to us?

One helpful method is to ask what the New Testament does with it. Here is what we find:

**The New Testament will either
Ratify, Modify, Nullify or Clarify
the Old Testament.**

a) Ratify. The New Testament restates the command and carries it forward unchanged. The moral commands run this way. Paul quotes the fifth commandment and applies it directly to children in the church.

Ephesians 6:2–3

“Honor your father and mother” (this is the first commandment with a promise), “that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land.”

b) Modify. The command carries forward in altered form. The Sabbath is the standard case. The shape of it changes, and the reason given is that the observance was pointing at something that has now arrived.

Colossians 2:16–17

Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath.

These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.

c) Nullify. The command is set aside because what it served has arrived. The sacrificial system is the clearest case in Scripture.

Hebrews 10:11–12

And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God,

Notice the posture. The priest stands, because the work is never finished. Christ sat down. The sacrifices stopped, not because they failed, but because they succeeded at what they were for, which was to point forward.

d) Clarify. The New Testament goes to the heart of the command and shows what it always required. The Sermon on the Mount does this repeatedly. You have heard that it was said, and then: but I say to you. Murder reaches to anger, adultery reaches to the look.

Matthew 5:21–22

You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’

But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire.

The last kind of context is the nearest one. It is simply reading what surrounds the passage. Ask the same two questions at every level: how does this fit, and why is it here?

c. Book

- Read the book of study over and over and over.
- What is the argument of the book?
- What is the theme of the book?
- What appears to be the outline of the book?

d. Chapter

- How does this chapter fit into the argument of the book?
- Why is this chapter here?

e. Paragraph

- How does this fit in the chapter?
- Why is this paragraph here?

f. Sections and Sentences

- How does this fit in the paragraph?
- Why is this here?

Note: If God has ordained every word, then every word, every sentence, every section, every paragraph, every chapter, and every book has a purpose. It is our job to think all these issues through.

Illustration: 1 Peter 2:18–25 cf. 1 Peter 2:13–3:12.

Read alone, 2:18–25 is counsel to servants with harsh masters, and it can be made to sound like a call to accept mistreatment quietly. Read inside 2:13–3:12, it belongs to a sustained argument running through citizens and governors, servants and masters, wives and husbands, and finally all of you together. Peter is teaching the whole church a single pattern, and he anchors it in Christ.

1 Peter 2:21

For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps.

3 John gives us an advantage we will rarely have again. Fourteen verses, so the whole book fits in one reading. We can hold the entire literary context in our heads at once.

Homework

Due Sunday, August 9. Answer each question first, then check yourself against the response guide.

Question 1: The Historical Setting of 3 John

Using a study Bible introduction, a Bible handbook, or a New Testament survey, write a short background sketch of 3 John. Cover all five: who wrote it, roughly when, who received it, why it was written, and what its theme is. Four or five sentences is plenty. Where the letter itself gives you the answer, say so.

Response guide: *The author identifies himself only as the elder, and the letter is traditionally and rightly attributed to the apostle John, the same voice as 1 and 2 John. The date is late in the first century, most commonly placed in the 90s, likely from Ephesus. The recipient is Gaius, a believer commended for his care of traveling workers; he is not identifiable with certainty as any other Gaius in the New Testament, which is why the letter has to tell us who he is. The purpose is threefold: to commend Gaius for receiving and supporting traveling brothers, to confront Diotrephes, who refuses them and puts out of the church those who would receive them, and to commend Demetrius, who is probably carrying the letter. The theme is that walking in the truth shows itself in how we treat those who carry the truth.*

Question 2: The Cultural Setting of 3 John 5–8

Read 3 John 5 through 8. Find out what you can about travel and hospitality in the first-century Roman world. Then answer in your own words: why did receiving traveling teachers matter so much, and what did John mean by sending them on their journey in a manner worthy of God? Then say what Diotrephes was actually accomplishing in verse 10 by refusing them.

Response guide: Travel was slow, expensive, and dangerous, and public inns were few, costly, and known for immorality, so travelers depended on households. For the church this was not a courtesy, it was infrastructure. Traveling workers had gone out for the sake of the name and took nothing from unbelievers, which meant that if believers did not house and provision them, the work stopped. Sending them on their journey in a manner worthy of God means more than a warm goodbye. It means supplying what the next leg required: food, money, provisions, and companions, given at a level that reflects the God whose name they carry. Which is why verse 10 is so serious. By refusing the brothers and putting out those who received them, Diotrephes was putting missionaries in danger, and making himself the only voice in the room. That is what John says he intends to address when he comes.

Question 3: Where Does This Command Land?

Deuteronomy 22:8

When you build a new house, you shall make a parapet for your roof, that you may not bring the guilt of blood upon your house, if anyone should fall from it.

Does the New Testament ratify, modify, nullify, or clarify this command? More than one may fit, so give every answer you think applies and one sentence of reasoning for each. Then say what obeying its principle would look like at your house this week.

Response guide: Nullified as a binding building code. Ratified at the level of principle. Both fit, and holding them together is the point of the question. Here is the reasoning. Houses in Israel had flat roofs used as living space, so a low wall around the edge was the difference between a normal evening and a funeral. No American house needs a parapet, and the New Testament never mentions one, so the building code does not bind us. But the command carries its own reason: so that you do not bring the guilt of blood on your house. That reason is love of neighbor made concrete, and the New Testament restates and carries that forward in Romans 13:9 and 10 and in Galatians 5:14. So the specific form is gone and the obligation remains. At your house it is the loose stair rail, the pool without a fence, the extension cord across the walkway, the tires you have been meaning to replace before someone else rides in that car.
