



Cutting It Straight

Lesson 4: Foundational Principles of Interpretation

Key Verse: Acts 17:11

“Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily *to see* whether these things were so.”

Overview of Bible Interpretation¹

Although God does not specifically tell us in His Word *how* to interpret Scripture, the approach we take to studying the Bible flows out of the nature of Scripture itself.

1. The Dual _____ of Scripture

- a. Dual authorship is important to Bible interpretation because it reminds us of how we got the Bible.
- b. **2 Peter 1:21. “But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is *a matter of one’s own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.*”**
 - i. Who does this verse tell us about the human authors? _____
 - ii. Who is the ultimate author? _____

FOUNDATION #1: God is the Ultimate Author of Scripture, and the prophets were His spokesmen.

2. The _____ of Scripture

- a. Even though the Bible contains _____ books written by at least _____ different men over a period of _____ years, it has _____ Ultimate Author.
- b. In other words, the Bible contains a single, _____, consistent, harmonious message from God in which no one part of Scripture is contradictory to another.

¹ Adapted from Matt Waymeyer BI 505 Hermeneutics Course Syllabus, pg. 25-31.

FOUNDATION #2: Come to a given passage Scripture with the understanding that it is part of a larger unified whole, and that it should not be interpreted in contradiction to any other passage.

3. The Overall _____ of Scripture

- a. Deuteronomy 6:6–7. Who did Moses expect to know the Scriptures? _____

- b. Psalm 19:7. Who does the Bible make wise? _____

- c. Psalm 119:130. Who can understand the Bible? _____
- d. This is not to say that all parts of the Bible are equally clear and that there are no difficult passages to interpret. Peter speaks about Paul’s letter and says, “in which are some things hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort” (2 Peter 3:16). However, the Bible possesses an overall clarity that reflects God’s desire that His people understand the truths contained in it. It may take diligence and hard work to interpret Scripture accurately (2 Tim 2:15), but the Bible *can* be understood.

Foundation #3: Come to a given passage of Scripture with (a) the presupposition that it was understandable to its original audience and (b) the expectation that you can understand its true meaning as well.

4. The _____ Meaning of Scripture

- a. God intends that we understand the Bible. Therefore, a given passage of Scripture—like any other piece of literature we read—must contain only one meaning.
- b. 2 Timothy 2:15. What does Paul imply in this verse? _____

- c. 2 Peter 3:16. What do the untaught and unstable do with God’s Word? _____

- d. Williams Ames said, “There is only one meaning for every place in Scripture. Otherwise the meaning of Scripture would not only be unclear and uncertain, but there would be no meaning at all—for anything which does not mean one thing surely means nothing”²

Foundation #4: Come to a given passage of Scripture with the assumption that it contains but one true meaning, the meaning that the original author intended to communicate to the original audience.

5. The _____ Nature of Scripture

- a. What is the contextual nature of Scripture?
- i. It refers to the fact that the Bible is not an independent and free-floating list of detached truths that dropped out of heaven one day or over periods of time. Instead, every verse of Scripture is connected to the _____, _____, and _____ context in which it was originally written.
- b. *Historical Context*
- i. Each book of the Bible was written to specific readers at a specific time in history. Therefore, we must seek to understand the historical background and the circumstances that led to the writing of that book of the Bible. That will then help us understand the meaning the passages that occur in that book.
- c. *Cultural Context*
- i. Each book of the Bible was written by and to people who lived in a particular culture. Therefore, the writings will reflect that culture. Since that culture is different from our modern culture, we need to become familiar with the original culture in order to discover the intended meaning of a passage.
- d. *Literary Context*
- i. Each passage of Scripture was written as a part of a larger literary unit and must be interpreted in light of the literary context. Scripture contains various literary genres—narratives, poetry, prophecy, proverbs, epistles, parables, etc.—which must be considered when in the interpretation of a passage.

² William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, ed. and trans. John D Eusden (Boston: Pilgrim, 1968), 188.

FOUNDATION #5: The first step in Bible interpretation is to examine the historical, cultural, and literary contexts of the passage under consideration.

6. The Human _____ of Scripture

- a. The purpose of the Bible is to convey truths from God to human beings. How do we know? Because it is written in human languages.
- b. Roy Zuck said, “Thoughts are expressed through words, and words are the building blocks of sentences. Therefore, to determine God’s thoughts we need to study His words and how they are associated in sentences. If we neglect the meanings of words and how they are used, we have no way of knowing whose interpretations are correct.”³
- c. The interpreter must be careful to analyze the grammar and determine the meanings of words according to their normal, grammatical, and lexical uses at the time they were written. Doing this will help the interpreter determine the divinely intended meaning.

FOUNDATION #6: Analyze the grammar and determine the meaning of words according to their normal grammatical and lexical uses at the time that the passage was written.

Examples

1. If someone said, “If you need more information, I can send you a text.” How would you interpret that in 2023? How would someone interpret that in the 1800’s?
2. “The pen is mightier than the sword.” If two men were going to fight, and one takes this literally, who would win the fight? This is a parable that means an exchange of ideas is a better way to settle disputes than with violence.
3. Acts 13:36 says, “For David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, fell asleep, . . .” How would you interpret “fell asleep”? Did he take a nap? Was he so tired after serving that he just went to bed? The rest of the verse gives us understanding, “. . . and was laid among his fathers and underwent decay.” “Fell asleep” means he died.

³ Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation: A Practical Guide to Discovering Biblical Truth* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook, 1991), 99.