

Interpreting the Bible

Accurately studying and interpreting the Bible is a critical skill. Every Christian needs to know how to hear and interpret God's words to us in the Bible. Even more importantly, leaders who teach others must be especially careful to interpret the Bible properly as they regularly spend time studying it.

The process of interpreting the Bible is called hermeneutics. The purpose of biblical interpretation is to find the plain meaning of the text and how it applies to your life. Hermeneutics is a science because there are specific rules you follow in the process. But it is also an art, because you have to learn how and when to apply the rules to the very subjective and dynamic content of communication.

The process of interpreting the Bible follows two simple steps. First you have to determine accurately what the original author meant, and then you must determine how what they said applies to you today. The fact that the Bible is made up of many different types (genres) of literature means that each type has some specific guidelines to follow as you interpret them. But before we get into the hermeneutical principles, it will be helpful to consider why this study is so important.

The Need for Interpretation

Everyone is an interpreter. Every time we read a book or letter we interpret. Every time we listen to someone speak we interpret. In many ways we are quite experienced at the process of interpretation. In fact, there will likely be some aspects of this module that may seem familiar and just common sense. But the amount of conflict in everyday life caused by misunderstandings demonstrates that our ability to interpret spoken and written communication is far from perfect. And the frequent disagreements among Christians, the many denominations within the Christian Church, and the large number of heretical teachings and cults all prove that careful, disciplined, and consistent interpretation of the Bible is all too uncommon.

There are two major reasons why we need a defined, methodical approach to interpreting the Bible. The first is the nature of the Bible itself. The Bible was written over 1,900 years ago in ancient languages within cultures that have no modern equivalents. Any one of those three factors would make a document difficult to understand for a modern reader. Combined, the historical, linguistic, and cultural differences create a very challenging gap between today's Bible students and the setting in which the Bible was written and was to be understood.

The historical distance between a Bible student and the time of its writing is huge. We live in an age of industrial, technological, and knowledge advances, but the world of the Bible was incredibly primitive and limited. Just about every area of life was different in the time of the Bible. Travel was slow, expensive, and dangerous. Few had access to the Bible in written form, or written documents of any kind for that matter. A mirror for them was a small polished circular piece of bronze, if they had one at all. News traveled by word of mouth, and information from beyond their local village was slow and unreliable. Common people had no transportation except their own two feet. Medical treatment was based more on superstition than science. The average life span for people in New Testament times was likely half of what it is today in many nations. Where we today anticipate the future based

on weather forecasts, global media, instantaneous communication, and scientific awareness, people in Bible times lived with uncertainty about what they could not see, hear, know, or understand. But even with all these dramatic differences, for us to begin to hear the full message of the Bible we must try as much as possible to put ourselves in their time in history.

The linguistic distance between ourselves and the writers of the Bible is also great. Hebrew and Greek are very different languages from one another, and certainly at least one if not both are dramatically different from any modern reader's native tongue. Differences in word order (syntax) and grammar require different skills for understanding the real meaning of a sentence. The meaning of the ancient words must be derived from other ancient writings, which also require interpreting. If that were not enough, the meanings of words change relatively quickly in the scale of time we are dealing with, so pinning down the meaning of an ancient word at the exact time of writing can be difficult.

Possibly the greatest difference between ourselves and the authors and audiences of the Bible is the cultural distance. It is hard to overestimate the vast difference between the cultures of the Bible times and any modern culture. There are no political structures today that come close to those of Bible times. Economic and monetary systems were entirely different. The opportunity for, value of, and treatment of women are all dramatically better today in most cultures than in the Bible times. Family structure and roles were very different. Slavery was a normal feature in the cultures of the Biblical narratives. Attitudes toward appropriate appearance, attire, and fashion were considerably different. Education levels for both men and especially women were much lower than are typical today. And it is nearly certain that not a single television program on the air today showed up in the channel listings back in Bible times.

Since we are dealing with the cultures of the Bible at this point, it is important to note that while God spoke through the writers of the Bible from within their cultures that does not mean that their cultures were the divine norm. The cultures found within the Bible are not sacred, best, or even better than those in the world today. They simply were the ones that existed at times when God chose to communicate to mankind. This fact may help you understand why interpretation is so important. The cultures God spoke into, regardless of the majesty, magnificence, or eternal relevance of the message, limited His vocabulary and thought to what they could meaningfully understand. The eternal message cast into a particular historical setting, though, is exactly what must be drawn out (exegesis) of the biblical texts.

The Bible itself contains examples of church leaders interpreting the Bible so the people could understand. In Nehemiah 8:8, Ezra and the Levites read from the Books of the Law they had recently discovered:

"They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading." Nehemiah 8:8

While the Jews had been in captivity in Babylon they had stopped speaking Hebrew and had been assimilated into the Assyrian culture. Therefore the language and culture of the Bible was too distant for them to be able to understand. Ezra and the Levites had to interpret for them so they could understand it and apply it.

Certainly the historical, linguistic, and cultural distances between the times of the Bible and ourselves are one key reason why biblical interpretation is necessary, but another equally important motivation is so that we can have great confidence in the message we hear from God. If we base our eternal destiny, worldview, values, and direction for daily living and lifelong decisions on what we read in the Bible, then it is impossible to put too much emphasis on accurately interpreting what it says. There are so many different views about important doctrinal matters, such as spiritual gifts, divine health, eternal security, and marriage, held by people who claim they have a biblical basis for their beliefs. How can you be confident that what you believe is correct? And who is to say that a cult is a cult if we are free to read into the bible (eisegesis) whatever we want it to say?

Since everyone who reads the Bible is involved in interpretation, we need to learn and master the principles of interpreting the Bible, so we can overcome the distances between ourselves and the original texts and have confidence that we accurately hear God's message to us.

Essential Principles for Interpretation

It is apparent that having clear, proper, and consistent rules for interpreting the Bible is necessary to avoid incorrect interpretations and heretical doctrines. The first step is to bridge the historical, linguistic, and cultural gaps and determine what the author meant. We must learn how to hear the biblical message as the original recipients would have heard it. To do that, we need to learn to read the text carefully and ask the right questions of the text.

It can be tempting to use the process of interpretation to prove one's inductive skills, logic, spirituality, orthodoxy, theology, or, in some cases, creativity. None of those are acceptable motivations for interpreting the Bible. The first three are simply pride. The second three are attempting to read into the Bible what isn't necessarily there (eisegesis). Be clear that the goal of your Bible study and interpretation is not to uncover a new interpretation that no one has ever seen before. **Unique interpretations are nearly always wrong.** The goal is to draw out of the Bible the plain meaning that was originally intended by the author (exegesis) – nothing more, nothing less.

While reading through the following guidelines, you may feel like the process seems dry and mechanical. But for the believer, that should not be the case. A proper application of the principles of interpretation documented here includes both the common sense of the basic guidelines plus the expectation, or better, the necessity of the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit to help illuminate and bring life to the texts. The goal of these principles for the believer is really an “**enlightened common sense**” approach to interpreting the Bible. The guidelines offer a disciplined, objective framework in which we can be certain we are clearly hearing the Holy Spirit's guidance as we look carefully at the text. The Spirit, on the other hand, makes the inspired texts come alive so the process becomes much more than simply an academic exercise studying a typical work of historical literature.

First Determine the Original Meaning of the Text

We will begin by outlining principles that apply to any text. As stated earlier, the purpose of biblical interpretation is to find the author's original meaning and then determine how to properly apply that meaning to life today. There are two basic steps to achieve this goal. First, you must determine the

original meaning of the text. The meaning is what the author intended, and is determined from the facts of history (context) and the rules of grammar (content). Once you have established the plain meaning of the text, then you must decide if and how the passage should be applied today, keeping in mind that **a passage cannot mean today what it never meant to the author**. After reviewing these general principles, we will look at guidelines to help understand and apply specific types of biblical texts.

The goal of this step in the interpretive process is to accurately decide what the author intended for his audience to hear, using the context and content of the passage. This requires concentrated effort and practice. For the reasons listed earlier, it is very difficult for a modern Bible student to completely remove himself from his modern time and culture. It is also hard to separate yourself from your church doctrines and theological presuppositions. Yet, to understand an author's meaning fully, you must separate yourself from your current setting and put yourself in the writer's culture and time. Your ability to do that will directly affect your accuracy of interpreting a Bible author's original meaning, and therefore your effectiveness in making proper practical application of the text for today.

For example, if you are interpreting Matthew 25:1-13, the parable of the ten virgins, your study could go any number of ways if you are not careful to avoid reading in your presuppositions into the text. To use an American figure of speech, "If all you have is a hammer, everything you see looks like a nail." You may be someone who is very outspoken about the sovereignty of God (also sometimes called Calvinism, or more correctly, hyper-Calvinism) and see in this passage that the five foolish virgins who were not allowed inside as examples of church attenders who were not really saved. Or alternately, if you are inclined to believe in the free will of man (also called Arminianism), you might see here proof of believers losing their salvation. You may have a favorite worship song that mentions the metaphor of oil representing the Holy Spirit and try to propose how this parable is about the Holy Spirit's role in salvation. If your theological focus always seems to come back to the study of end times (eschatology), you may see this passage supporting the idea of a pre-tribulation rapture. Or if you proudly always take the Bible literally, then of course you will interpret this passage to mean that you should always carry extra oil with you wherever you go. But all of these interpretations, obviously clouded by presuppositions being read into the text, are incorrect. They unfortunately miss the plain meaning of the text, clearly exposed by the context and content (see especially verse 13), which is that we should always be ready for Christ's return. Making it say anything else, even if it happens to be biblical, is improper use of the text.

There are two properties of a text that help you determine its original meaning: context and content.

Context: Context is the setting in which a book is written. Context includes matters such as time, culture, geography, political and economic situation, and purpose of writing. When seeking to establish a thorough contextual background for a passage, one must answer the following questions, often called the historical-cultural contextual analysis:

- Who is the author?
 - What was the author's cultural background?
 - What was the author's spiritual background?
 - What was the author's authority for writing?
 - What was the author's situation and experience that would affect their message?

- Who is the intended audience?
 - What was the audience's spiritual commitment?
 - What were their main sources of livelihood?
 - What threats and concerns did they face?
- What was the general historical setting of the author and audience?
 - What type of political system were they living in?
 - What was the economic situation?
 - What was an average day's wage?
 - What was the average person's financial situation?
 - Were there relevant social issues in play?
 - Slavery?
 - Exile?
 - Racial conflict?
 - What city-specific pagan traditions or church conflicts were faced by the recipients (especially in the Epistles)?
 - Are there any social customs mentioned in the passage? (Use a Bible dictionary to help discover and explain these.)
- Examples:
 - Lamps (from the passage in Matthew 25 mentioned above) – How big were they? How did they work? What were they for?
 - Mirror (1 Corinthians 13:12) – What were the mirrors like in that day? Why do we “see in a mirror dimly”?
 - Nineveh (Jonah 1:1-3) – Why did Jonah not want to go there?
- What was the author's purpose for writing?
- How does each specific passage fit into the overall message of the book?
- How does each specific passage fit into the author's argument?
- Is the passage descriptive or prescriptive?
 - Descriptive (a passage containing stories, narratives, song, poetry, etc.)
 - Narrative
 - Found throughout the Old Testament, Gospels, and Acts.
 - God's actions within narrative passages do not make them normative.
 - Prescriptive (a passage containing explicit commands, laws, rules, and principles)
 - Found in the Law, Wisdom, Prophets, Gospels (Jesus words), and the Epistles.
 - Some are normative, some are individual.
 - When there are differences among prescriptive passages, do not universalize them.
 - When there are no differences among prescriptive passages, they are more likely universal. (But less so where there are one or few instances)
- Who was being addressed in the passage? (This can be different than the intended audience when the author is speaking to the audience about someone else.)
 - Promises
 - Generally addressed to one of the following:
 - National Israel
 - Old Testament believers
 - New Testament believers
 - “Every promise in the Book is mine...”

- You really do not want that
- You cannot just claim the ones you want and dismiss the rest
- You must follow the interpretive principles to find out which ones you can rightly claim!
- What is the primary teaching focus? (as compared to incidental detail)
 - Especially in the parables, it is easy to get distracted by the details and miss the point. Jesus often could have used other details in His parables to teach the same truths. The principles are what we need to discover. We should not form doctrines around the incidental details.
 - Examples:
 - Jesus' use of "leaven" in His warning about the hypocrisy of the Pharisees in Matthew 16:5-12 – The disciples mistakenly focused on the detail of bread in His metaphor and missed Jesus' real message until He corrected them.
 - The parable of the ten virgins in Matthew 25 mentioned above – The mention of the oil and lamps is incidental.
 - The judgment of the sheep and the goats later in Matthew 25 – Jesus' use of goats to represent the unrighteous in the judgment does not imply anything inherently evil about goats.
 - The disciples often made this exact mistake, by focusing on details in Jesus' parables, metaphors, and similes, instead of properly interpreting His intended message.

Answering these questions will give you the basis to better understand the background behind the passage you are interpreting, and until you have researched these matters you should not attempt to decide what a passage means or how it should be applied. (These questions are the foundation for the Macro Bible study method suggested in module 2.7.3.)

Content: The next step in determining what the author originally intended a text to mean is to look carefully at the content of the passage. The content is made up of the words (lexicon) and their relationship to one another (syntax). Words have meaning only in sentences. Sentences have meaning in relation to the sentences around them. Words may take on different meanings in different contexts, but **in a specific context a word will have only one intended meaning**. How the word is used and the words and sentences around it should give you everything you need to find out which meaning is correct. This is commonly called the lexical-syntactical analysis of the passage.

- Identify the type of literature. This will help you know how to interpret the passage. We will look more carefully at genre-specific guidelines in the next major section.
 - Prose – Literal interpretation predominates. Begin with a literal interpretation unless there is a clear reason (besides your presuppositions or cultural pressure) to interpret figuratively.
 - Poetry – Figurative interpretation predominates. (One third of the Old Testament is poetry.) Many newer translations indent the poetic passages to help the reader identify them.
 - Apocalyptic – Symbolic interpretation is dominant.
- Find the natural divisions in the passage.
 - Ignore the verse and chapter divisions.
 - Focus on sentences and paragraphs.

- Generally the first sentence in a paragraph is either transitional or thematic. Either case will give you important clues for interpretation.
- Highlight the connecting words.
 - “And” continues the same thought from the previous text.
 - “But” contrasts with the thought from the previous text.
 - “Therefore” suggests that the following statement is a result of the previous text.
- Determine the meaning of the individual words.
 - Many words can have distinctly different meanings. E.g., light, heart, flesh.
 - Often the meaning is defined or clarified in the passage.
 - Especially in Hebrew parallelism, the same thought is restated with synonymous or contrasting words in parallel.
 - Study parallel passages to help clarify the meaning of a word.
 - Figures of speech may give different meanings.
 - Use your Bible dictionary or exhaustive concordance to help you define the words.
- Identify the syntax, or word relationships, of the words in each of the sentences.
 - Determine the specific role each word plays in their sentence. Parts of speech include subject, verb, object, and predicate.

These steps above will help you identify the most likely meaning of the text and should allow you to summarize the passage accurately. Now that you have thoroughly evaluated the text and its meaning, follow these final steps to validate your interpretation:

- Reevaluate your interpretation of the passage within the author’s argument
 - **What is the point?**
 - What is the role this passage is playing within the author’s argument?
 - Does your interpretation fit into his argument?
- Evaluate your interpretation of the passage compared to other related passages. **Let the Bible interpret the Bible.**
 - Does your interpretation of this passage agree with the proper interpretation of the other passages in the Bible related to the same topic?
 - Is your passage more or less clear than others on the topic? Do not allow the interpretation of an obscure passage to override the plain meaning of clear passages.
- Compare your interpretation with commentaries.
 - Does your interpretation agree with the commentary? That is probably good.
 - Is your interpretation at least plausible? That is probably OK.
 - Is your interpretation unique? That is probably not good.

Working through these content matters will give you the basis to better understand the passage you are interpreting, and until you have completed these steps you should not attempt to decide what a passage means or how it should be applied. (These steps are the foundation for the Micro Bible study method and the Sectional Bible study method found in module 2.7.3.)

Then Determine How the Text Applies Today

Once we have accurately established what the author was originally saying to his audience, the second step is to properly discern how the passage applies today – or if it does at all. This step involves

evaluating the context and content of the passage to determine if the passage applies normatively to all people at all times, to some people in some specific contexts, in principle though not specifics, or not at all. This process varies depending on the type of biblical literature you are studying, so this section will be divided by genre. For passages that do have modern application, the final output of this step is one or more practical ways to apply the text today. **There is one interpretation, but there are potentially many applications.**

Before covering the various genres of biblical material, it is important to keep the following three general interpretive guidelines in mind:

- Do not try to force a text to answer questions it was not written to answer. The writers of the Bible were not answering 21st Century questions.
- Accept the limitations of a passage. Many passages do not provide all of the information you need to answer all of your questions. If it is not there, then do not fill in the gaps with your opinion.
- Accept that some doctrinal areas have an ongoing tension between two seemingly conflicting positions. (E.g., sovereignty versus free will, different church polities, end times)

Narratives:

What is a narrative? A narrative is a story. The problem with the word “story” is that in American English a story is often fictional. But biblical narratives describe non-fictional, historical events and how those events reveal something about God and/or humans.

Narratives include 40% of the Old Testament and much of the New Testament. Specifically, in the Old Testament Genesis, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Daniel, Jonah, and Haggai are nearly completely narrative, along with much of Exodus, Numbers, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah, and Job. In the New Testament, most of the Gospels and nearly all of Acts are narrative. Narratives are the largest single category of literature type in the Bible, so we must learn how to properly interpret them.

In their book *How to Interpret the Bible for All It's Worth*, Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart propose viewing biblical narratives on three different levels. They suggest that at the top level, every narrative in the Bible, every character and every story, are all to be viewed as part of the universal epic story of God working throughout history to protect and provide for humans, resulting ultimately in Christ's incarnation and atonement for sin. In other words, God is the central character of all of the biblical narratives.

The middle level of a narrative relates to the bigger thematic stories in the Bible. For instance, in the Old Testament the focus is on Israel and includes the stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, the 12 tribes, Joseph, the exodus, conquest, kingdoms, exile, and restoration. In the New Testament, the focus is on The Church, and includes the story of Jesus, the disciples, Paul, the Holy Spirit, the launch of the church, and end times. The middle level is the big picture within the big picture.

The bottom level is made up of all the hundreds and hundreds of little narratives and groups of narratives that make up the middle level stories that themselves form the top level story of God. For instance, each of Joseph's dreams, his being sold to traveling merchants and subsequent purchase by

Potiphar, the leadership learned during his service of Potiphar and later the jail-keeper, his ability to interpret dreams, his rise to power under Pharaoh, the provision for all the people of Egypt and the surrounding areas, the provision for Joseph's family (Israel and Joseph's brothers), their move to join Joseph in Egypt, etc., are all narratives and groups of narratives that make up the bottom level of the story of Joseph.

With this structured perspective on understanding the narratives, there are a few thoughts that will help you better interpret and apply them for today. First, realize that **every** narrative fits within a middle level theme, which fits within the top level story about God. Narratives in the Bible are not just stories about people who lived during ancient times. Proper understanding of a narrative passage requires finding where it fits in a middle level story, and thus within the overall ultimate big picture of God's plan.

The definition of a narrative is that it describes a historical event—it tells a story. Therefore, when interpreting narratives there are some important keys to keep in mind. Narratives are not intended primarily to teach or prescribe behavior. But they are uniquely able to draw us into stories illustrating the actions and outcomes of those who do or do not follow God. It is often the case that narratives, in fact, describe the wrong thing to do. With one obvious exception, the narratives in the Bible are about humans who are often far from perfect. And sometimes we get an important interpretive key in narratives when the texts provide divinely inspired commentary, such as when the narratives state a person was a good or bad king (and why), the reason God did or did not remove His blessing from someone (e.g., 1 Chronicles 10:13-14), and the causes of the exiles.

Remember, also, that since the narratives are set in their historical environment they may include cultural aspects of the time in history, such as polygamy, slavery, various political structures, and other cultural facts without prescribing them as normative or good. They describe what happened, not what should have happened nor what should happen every time.

Not every bottom level narrative has a moral; not every bottom level narrative teaches a theology. Do not spend all of your time looking for deep meaning in every word or event, or you could easily miss how the passage fits into the bigger picture that illustrates a very important truth. And although narratives were not written to answer ethical questions or to build theological doctrines, they may illustrate them or even include statements by God, Jesus, or others that can be used for such purposes. Sometimes those points are stated directly, but sometimes they are only implied.

Narratives often do not include details we might think are important and that would give us a more complete story, and sometimes they only introduce an issue without providing an answer. They only contain the information the author thought we needed to have.

And finally, narratives are not allegories or parables filled with hidden meanings. In general, it is very important not to make more of what is found in a narrative than is appropriate.

To illustrate these interpretive guidelines, we will look again at the story of Joseph in Genesis chapters 37 and 39-50. If you were prematurely to interpret the bottom level narratives without consideration of where they fit within the bigger pictures you could produce bad interpretations such as:

- Do not tell your dreams to others or you will get into big trouble.
- Even slaves can get ahead if they develop their administrative skills.
- If you are going to get arrested, you will be better off with some business experience.
- Cupbearers are forgetful; God hates bakers and kills them.
- Foreigners rise to positions of authority faster than natives do.

A more thoughtful, structured approach to the narratives, though, will result in meaningful, trustworthy interpretation and applications of the passages. For example:

All of the bottom level narratives build the middle level story of Joseph, but on the top level, God is the One who provides Joseph with blessing, favor, and His presence. “God was with Joseph” becomes a refrain through the story—whether he is enslaved, working, falsely accused, in prison, interpreting dreams, or second only to Pharaoh. Interpretation and application following the guidelines suggested above result in the following applications and conclusions:

- Bottom level –
 - Avoid sexual immorality. Run away!
 - Work hard and with integrity regardless of whatever position in which you may find yourself. God may be preparing you for a much greater future role.
- Middle level –
 - God preserved the family of Abraham through a severe famine through the life of Joseph (one of Jacob’s sons); Joseph rose to power in Egypt (tells how the people end up in Egypt at the beginning of the book of Exodus).
- Top level –
 - God was with Joseph and gave Him favor, success, and blessing in order to accomplish His greater purposes of saving the chosen family line.

These guidelines above are applicable to all narrative forms found in the Bible, including Old Testament Narratives, the Gospels, and Acts, but the latter two deserve some additional discussion.

Gospels: The Gospels are the first four books of the New Testament. On the surface, the Gospels are relatively simple and are similar to the Old Testament narratives. True, they contain stories about Jesus and His disciples and interactions with others. But they also contain the sayings of Jesus. And to add to the interpreter’s task, there are four Gospels offering four different perspectives on Jesus’ life. Further, there are concepts that are completely foreign to modern readers, such as “the Kingdom of God” and “the Kingdom of Heaven.” All of these matters make interpreting and applying the Gospels much less simple.

Jesus did not write the Gospels, so they are not autobiographies. Though they include a lot of biographical information, they are not true biographies, either. They do not really even contain the actual words Jesus spoke (except in a few cases), since Jesus spoke Aramaic and all of the Gospels come to us in Greek. Justin Martyr, an early church father, best described them as “the memoirs of the apostles.”

The Gospel authors each wrote their own account for different audiences and for different purposes.

- Mark –
 - Shortest
 - Least unique content
 - Basic details
 - Event driven
 - Focused on Jesus as the Messiah
 - From Peter's perspective
- Matthew –
 - Jewish audience
 - Longer
 - Affinity for Law and Jewish customs
 - Used Mark as a source
- Luke –
 - Gentile audience
 - Used several sources
 - Contains unique parables, etc.
- John –
 - Jewish
 - Personal
 - Much more theological
 - Stressed the divinity of Christ
 - Much more content focused on the last week of Jesus' life and His resurrection.

Among the four Gospels, there is only one common miracle (the feeding of the 5,000) among them! They contain the story of Jesus' life and His words from four different perspectives, only two of which were eyewitnesses. If you have access to a Harmony of the Gospels, you will better be able to view the four Gospels together and see both their commonality and their uniqueness.

These matters must be considered when interpreting the Gospels. In addition, everything Jesus said and did is set within the historical-cultural context of 1st century Judaism. You must understand that in order to interpret properly His actions and sayings and apply them today. The use of a Bible dictionary is helpful as a starting point.

Further, you do not have to read Jesus' words in the Gospels long to recognize the foundational importance of the concept of the "Kingdom of God" to His teachings. To interpret what He said properly, you must understand what the Kingdom of God meant to Him. The Kingdom of God is actually a simple concept: it is the practical rule of God over creation. In Jesus' teachings it is clear that in a real and material way, His arrival on the earth began the Kingdom of God. But it is also clear that many of Jesus' teachings about the Kingdom were about the future—some imminent, some distant—and could only be realized fully in that future Kingdom. Examples of this include His teachings on righteousness, forgiveness, and the work of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, when interpreting Jesus' sayings in the Gospels, keep in mind Jesus' fundamental focus on the Kingdom of God.

Finally, when interpreting Jesus' words, realize that Jesus was a master teacher and used many different literary forms in His teaching, each of which should be understood in significantly different ways. For instance:

- **Hyperbole:** A literary device to make a point by exaggeration or overstatement.
 Luke 14:26 – Did Jesus really mean that His followers had to hate their fathers and mothers? No, that would contradict other clear passages in the Bible. Jesus was using hyperbole to say that His followers should love Him even more than their families.
 Matthew 5:28-30 – Was Jesus actually telling the disciples that they should literally cut off their arm or gouge out their eye if it was causing them to sin? No, He was not. He was using hyperbole to emphasize the importance of removing everything from our lives that tempts us to sin.
- **Simile:** A figure of speech that uses the words “like” or “as” to make a comparison of one thing with another thing of a different kind, and is used to make a description more emphatic or vivid.
 Examples: Matthew 10:16; Luke 13:20-21
- **Metaphor:** Another kind of analogy where one thing is regarded as representative or symbolic of something else, especially something abstract.
 Matthew 5:13; Matthew 5:14; John 6:35; John 10:9
 Interpretation of similes and metaphors should focus on the characteristic Jesus was trying to emphasize, instead of what He chose to use. In the two similes listed above, you should pursue what characteristic of sheep and leaven Jesus was trying to highlight. In the example metaphors above, you should discover what characteristics of salt and light Jesus would be focused on to describe His followers, and what characteristics of bread and a door He would have focused on to describe Himself.
- **Parables:** A simple story used to illustrate a moral or spiritual lesson.
 Example: Mark 4:2-8
 The important key to interpreting a parable is that Jesus used parables to illustrate a lesson. You should not read too much significance into the incidental details of the parables. Focus on the one key point. Parables are often followed by the explanation or application. Parables illustrate simple truths in compelling, unforgettable ways.
 If you can determine who Jesus' audience was, you can get a much better idea of what Jesus' primary point was. For instance, in Luke 7:40-42, Jesus used the parable of the moneylender when speaking to his host, Simon. Jesus was speaking a word of rebuke to him, and a word of grace to the prostitute. In the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32), Jesus' audience was the Scribes and Pharisees, with the tax-gatherers and sinners listening nearby. While our focus when hearing the parable is often the prodigal, Jesus' primary point was the reaction of the older son. Jesus was admonishing the self-righteous religious leaders, though in the process the eavesdropping commoners heard a secondary message of forgiveness.

Other literary devices Jesus used include proverbs (e.g., Matthew 6:21 and Mark 3:24-25), poetry (e.g., Matthew 7:7-8 and Matthew 5:1-8), questions (e.g., Matthew 17:24-28), and irony (e.g., Matthew 16:1-3).

These additional guidelines should help you more accurately interpret the Gospels as a special type of narrative text.

Acts – The most important issue with interpreting the book of Acts with respect to the other narrative sections of the Bible is that we (possibly unconsciously) expect Acts to be a normative expression of how the church should look and act, instead of simply a history describing how the early church looked and acted.

Looking more carefully at the book in its entirety will likely produce a good set of guidelines within which we should interpret the book. Luke’s focus on the Holy Spirit’s work in the early church and the expansion of Christianity to the Gentiles are two core themes that should be taken into account whenever you study it. But notice what is missing in Acts. Although many want to find it, there are no consistent examples of church polity, very few uniform statements or standards, no consistent examples of baptism, reception of the Holy Spirit, or the incidence of tongues. The only consistent message is salvation by faith.

Unless Scripture explicitly tells us we must do something, **what is merely narrated or described can never prescribe in a normative way**. This is not to say that it could never happen again, but to say that we do not require it to happen that way every time. For example, when believers today receive the Holy Spirit, we do not require the sound of rushing wind, the sign of fire over their heads, and the ability to speak in a foreign language. Yet the Bible does teach us to be constantly filled with the Holy Spirit. When believers gather together and pray, we do not experience a shaking of the building, but we are clearly taught to pray together. It might happen, but is not required to happen in order to be a biblical Christian.

Although it may not have been the authors’ primary purpose, **New Testament narratives have illustrative and pattern value**. A single event may or may not be a pattern. You must determine if the action is repeated several times, establishing a normative pattern. Or, possibly, that although the action is done only once, it is taught clearly (explicitly) elsewhere in the Bible. Narrative precedents may sometimes be regarded as repeatable patterns—even if they are not to be taken as normative. This is especially true when the practice itself is mandatory, but the mode is unclear.

For example, one can make an extremely strong case for believer’s baptism (faith before baptism). And regarding the mode, one can make a fairly strong case for baptism by immersion (based on examples and the meaning of the Greek word itself). There is virtually no biblical support for infant baptism (baptism before faith) and the baptismal modes of sprinkling or pouring.

The Lord’s Supper is a second example. The narratives clearly document the observance of the Lord’s Supper and give some general guidelines. But the narratives do not tell how often it should be observed and there are numerous different examples that would suggest different answers to that question. Since it originated as a Passover celebration, some suggest it should only be once a year. Others suggest they observed it every Lord’s Day. Still others suggest it must be only at night since it is the Lord’s Supper.

Finally, **allow the Bible to interpret the Bible**. When interpreting a single event or narrative, be sure to compare it to other related events elsewhere in the Bible to see if there is a general or overarching principle or pattern developing. And compare it with other prescriptive texts, as well, to make sure that those clear statements are considered when discerning the meaning of the narrative event. For

example, faith and repentance always comes before salvation, without exception. The consistent pattern throughout the narratives, along with consistent prescriptive statements support a normative conclusion.

Following these guidelines should help you properly interpret and apply the narratives in the book of Acts. Remember most of all to avoid the mistake of requiring anything described in Acts to be the norm for all Christians and the church for all time.

Epistles:

The word epistle means letter, and the writings in the New Testament that are called the Epistles are the books from Romans through Jude that were written as letters from a church leader, most often Paul, to another Christian, an entire church, or as a general treatise intended for the church at large.

When we study the Epistles, we are often very inconsistent in our application of the basic principles of interpretation, due in part to the cultural and religious presuppositions that can distort our “common sense” reading of the text. These assumptions can cause us to hear or ignore different commands within the same text because one fits into our established beliefs and another does not. This inconsistency may affect our study of the Epistles more than any other genre in the Bible. The biggest challenge therefore for interpreters of the Epistles is determining what in the biblical text is related only to the culture in which it was written versus what is timeless.

On one end of that spectrum is 2 Timothy 4:13, where Paul tells Timothy to “*bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas*” when he comes. No one would consider that to be a timeless command that should be obeyed by Christians today. At the same time, most would agree that the instruction found only a few verses earlier in 2 Timothy 4:2, “*preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching,*” is applicable to modern believers. The question is, “Why?” Why do we interpret one as culturally relative and the other as normative for all time?

Establishing proper guidelines to answer that question will help you consistently, accurately, and confidently interpret and apply the Epistles not only where the evidence is clear, but also in difficult passages such as 1 Corinthians 11:1-16, Hebrews 6:1-6, Romans 8:29-30, Hebrews 10:19-25, and 1 Timothy 2:8-15.

First we will restate a basic principle of interpretation. **A text cannot mean today what it never could have meant to its author and readers.** While this rule may not help reveal the meaning of a text, it may often identify interpretations that are not sound. If your interpretation results in a meaning that would not have made sense to the original author and audience, it is not valid.

Next you must **consider the situation of the author and audience and compare it with yours.** If the particulars of your life are the same as those of the author and audience, then you can receive the biblical text as God’s Word to you. If they are different, then you should step back and determine if there is a timeless principle taught in the text that can be applied to your situation, as long as your situation, while different, is at least comparable.

Be careful not to confuse cultural matters with moral issues. The Bible deals with a few matters that are demonstrated to be cultural, such as drink, observance of days, and food (Romans 14). Other matters that tend to differ from culture to culture should also be included in the same category, such as dress, worship style, and recreational activities.

But be clear that moral issues are not culturally relative, and are always applied consistently throughout the Epistles. For example, Paul's lists of moral imperatives for Christians are nothing like the cultural matters listed above. Neither is there any similarity between his lists of sin (Romans 1:28-32; 1 Corinthians 5:11; 1 Corinthians 6:9-10; Galatians 5:19-21; Ephesians 5:5; Colossians 3:5; 2 Timothy 3:2-5; and others) and those cultural matters above. In other words, it is appropriate to apply Paul's moral imperatives and sin lists today.

Note the importance of consistency. When interpreting the Epistles you should pay close attention to other passages related to the same topic. Matters that should be applied normatively today are treated consistently every time they are mentioned. If the Epistles do not give a consistent witness, you must be very careful about modern application.

You should also be careful when interpreting passages, even where there is great consistency, that deal with cultural situations where there was only one possible option in their culture. For example, there are numerous passages that prescribe the proper treatment of slaves and the proper behavior of a slave. If you were not careful to assess the cultural situation of that day, you could interpret those passages as an endorsement of slavery. Instead you should realize that in that day, slavery was the accepted norm and there was no other option. That being the case, the passages should instead be interpreted as simply how those Christians should act, given the cultural fact of slavery in their day.

Following these principles when interpreting the Epistles should help you avoid the mistake of applying instructions intended only for a specific person or church to today. They should also help you confidently identify those instructions that do apply to modern believers and how to teach them and live them out.

Law:

Although the first five books of the Old Testament are typically referred to as the Law, technically, the Law is found from Exodus 20 through the end of Deuteronomy. There are over 600 commands given in the Law, and they can be divided into three different types: ceremonial, civil, and moral.

Ceremonial laws instructed the Israelites how to fulfill their religious observances. These rituals were designed by God to illustrate the final atonement that would be realized in Jesus' sacrifice. Civil laws prescribed proper behavior for the citizens and government of Israel as a nation. Moral laws documented God's standard for what was right and wrong.

A primary purpose of the Law was to establish a covenant between God and Israel. The following of the Law by an Israelite was his or her expression of loyalty to Him. Another purpose was to objectively state what was good and what was evil. Further, the Law was given both to show His people how to live right and to restrain them from doing wrong. Finally, the Law was a tutor both to show an individual their sinfulness and to prescribe how they can be forgiven – by grace, through faith in the future Messiah's atoning sacrifice.

It is important to restate that the Covenant established by the Law was between God and Israel. Jesus established a New Covenant that replaced the Old Covenant. So, we must ask and answer the question: does the Old Testament Law apply normatively as law for modern believers? First of all, it should be clear that since modern readers of the Law are not citizens of ancient Israel, the civil laws given in the Law are not law for them. Second, since Jesus fulfilled all of the ceremonial law by His once-and-for-all sacrifice for sin on the cross, there is no more need for the ceremonial rituals that anticipated His atonement as a future event. The question that remains, then, is what about the moral laws found in the Law?

Jesus taught the Ten Commandments (Deuteronomy 5:6-22) and the two love God (Deuteronomy 6:5) and love your neighbor (Leviticus 19:18) passages as applicable under His New Covenant. In addition, as we have discussed previously, there is complete consistency among passages prescribing morality in the Bible, both in the Old and New Testaments. Right and wrong have not changed. **Therefore, it is appropriate to interpret passages in the Law that fall into the moral law category as applicable for Christians today.**

But all of the Law is nonetheless God's inspired Word to us and still has great value to the believer. While we may not be bound to the Law as our sign of loyalty to God, we can derive important truths about Him as we discover the reason and implications of the commands given in the Law. Since the ceremonial laws were given as a picture of Christ's atoning work, they can give us much greater depth of understanding of exactly what Jesus did for us on the cross. Additionally, though the civil laws may not be binding to Christians today, they certainly offer a valuable foundation for any modern civil government and responsible citizenship. Certainly all of the Law can be a tutor for believers today. (Galatians 3:22-24)

Poetry:

The poetic writings in the Bible are most often found in the Old Testament books of Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon, but poetic style literature can be found both within the narrative passages of the Old Testament history and in Jesus' sayings, as well. It is important to understand the nature of ancient poetry and how it differs from most modern poetry. Unlike modern poetry that uses rhyming words and defined cadences, Hebrew poetry was patterned around parallel thoughts. In many Bible translations, passages containing poetic language are indented to indicate that you are reading this special type of literature.

In general, biblical poetry uses much more emotional language than other types of writings, and frequently uses metaphor and symbolism to compress thought and meaning into relatively few words. Thus, you should be careful to avoid literal interpretation of text that is clearly metaphorical or symbolic, while at the same time remain as close as possible to the author's original thought. See the section above on the Gospels for more discussion of interpreting symbolic language.

When interpreting poetic sections of the Bible, you must **be very careful not to take the principles of wisdom as general promises or guarantees**. Certainly following the wise guidance found in the poetic books of the Bible will often result in making better decisions, avoiding evil, and receiving God's blessing, but the Bible is full of examples where upright, God-fearing individuals were visited with evil and hardship in spite of their wise behavior. In fact, the poetry of the Psalms is frequently driven by that exact inequity.

Psalms – The Psalms are unique among other types of writings in the Bible, because they are spoken to God or about God. Psalms are found throughout the Bible, from Moses’ song in Deuteronomy 32 to Mary’s Magnificat in Luke 1, in addition to the obvious collection of them in the Old Testament book of Psalms and the book of The Song of Solomon. Psalms are an often very personal expression of joy, sorrow, or despair on the part of the writer with God as the audience. As such, Psalms can help us express ourselves to God and also help us better understand God’s ways. In Psalms, we see the writers pour out their hearts to God. They are intentionally emotional writings expressing deep personal feelings. Often the writers use hyperbole and metaphorical language to more effectively convey their intense emotions. This **exaggeration and symbolism must be taken into account to properly understand their meaning and proper application.**

When interpreting Psalms, you must also remember they are not primarily theological writings and are not written to answer theological questions, but the **thoughts expressed within them can often contain important eternal principles**, such as the value of God’s Word in Psalm 119, the glory of God’s creation in Psalm 19, and the comfort of God’s presence in Psalm 23.

Finally, note that Psalms are always a complete thought and **should be interpreted as a distinct unit.** They should not be combined with adjacent text to determine their meaning, though you may better understand a Psalm if you are able to find narrative texts that add historical context to the Psalmist’s emotional state. For example, you can much better understand David’s confession of guilt in Psalm 51 by reading 2 Samuel 12:1-15.

Once again, following principles found in Psalms do not guarantee the modern reader a happy life. David who wrote many of them had almost constant strife and trouble in his life.

Wisdom – Wisdom literature is found primarily in the Old Testament books of Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes, with the book of Proverbs being the primary focus of this discussion. Proverbs is a truly unique collection of brief, pithy instructions to learn wisdom and the fear of the Lord. Proverbs contains comparisons and contrasts between wisdom and foolishness, righteousness and wickedness, and diligence and laziness. Proverbs has practical instruction for parenting, finance, and business, along with warnings against the adulterous woman, evil-scheming friends, and alcoholism. Proverbs is by far the most practical book in the Bible describing how to live out God’s timeless moral and ethical principles.

There are three primary grammatical constructions used in Proverbs. Synonymous parallelism is a comparison using two phrases that restate and complete one another. For example, Proverbs 9:10 says, *“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.”* Solomon was not suggesting there was a distinct difference between the fear of the Lord and knowledge of the Holy One, but was instead using the two of them together to make a clearer thought. The second line reinforces the first, and Solomon’s thought is the combination of both. Another example is found in Proverbs 3:5, *“Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding.”*

Synthetic parallelism is a comparison using two different phrases, the second of which completes the thought of the first. Proverbs 16:4 is an example, where Solomon says, *“The LORD has made*

everything for its purpose, even the wicked for the day of trouble.” The second line adds to the first, and the two phrases together make a complete thought. Another example is Proverbs 3:6, *“In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.”*

Finally, antithetic parallelism contrasts two different phrases, giving greater meaning and insight to the thought behind both. For instance, Proverbs 10:27 says, *“The fear of the LORD prolongs life, but the years of the wicked will be short.”* In this verse, Solomon contrasts the fear of the Lord with wickedness, and explains the general principle (but not guarantee!) of the blessing that comes with fearing God contrasted with the lack of that blessing that is experienced by the wicked. An additional example is Proverbs 10:24, *“What the wicked dreads will come upon him, but the desire of the righteous will be granted.”*

In addition to these three interpretive clues above, it is also important to remember that, like similes and metaphors, **proverbs are usually intended by their author to convey a single truth, thought, comparison, or contrast.** Pressing a proverb in all of its incidental points usually results in going beyond the author’s intention.

There is great value in studying and interpreting the Proverbs. They are simple, yet profound expressions of how to live a godly life, and are as applicable to the modern reader as they were to those who sat at Solomon’s feet when they were first spoken.

Prophecy:

The books of prophecy begin with Isaiah and extend through the rest of the Old Testament. I will also include the apocalyptic book of Revelation in this category, though its style is admittedly quite different from the rest. Prophecy and especially the book of Revelation are the most difficult types of biblical literature to understand and interpret. Here I will offer a few suggestions to help with interpretation, though the complex nature of the genre could justify much more space for full treatment.

Once more it is important to restate the primary principle of interpretation that **a passage cannot mean today something different from what it meant to the original author and hearers.** That can be especially hard to accept for Revelation 4-22, but the principle still applies. Even the prophetic vision documented by John in a much more symbolic style could be understood at least within the literal narration of the vision, though the meaning of the symbolism might not be clear to the hearer.

Second, it is necessary to **remove much of the “history written in advance” perception we often hold when we view prophecy.** First of all, the majority of passages recorded as prophecy are simply an individual acting as God’s spokesperson, or forthtelling. Furthermore, in the cases where prophets actually do predict future events, the vast majority of those foretellings are warnings to Israel, Judah, or a surrounding nation of imminent judgment, not predicting the distant future. Less than 1% of all prophetic passages relate to events that are still in the future today.

With that in mind, you may begin to recognize that there is no essential difference between the prophets of the Old Testament and the writers of the Epistles in the New Testament. Being aware of the real nature of the majority of prophecy in the Bible, you can then **apply the principles suggested above in the section on interpreting the Epistles.**

Further, you can **use the previously recommended principles of interpreting the often symbolic language Jesus used in the Gospels** to help unlock the meaning of the symbolism used in many prophetic passages, erring neither too far toward nor away from literalism in the process.

Conclusion

Finding out what the author meant and then determining how that applies today are the two simple steps that make up the foundation of proper interpretation of the Bible. Following them can take substantial time and practice. Further, the different styles of literature found in the Bible can require some additional guidelines to help you properly determine the original meaning and modern application of a passage. But no matter the amount of effort and time required, proper interpretation and application of the Bible is a critically important task, especially for those who teach others. A careful application of the principles suggested in this module will likely reveal two related truths: The Bible says much less than many people claim, but much more than we live. Careful interpretation and application with the illumination of the Holy Spirit are the solution for both.

PERSONAL APPLICATION:

1. Think of five words that mean something very different today from what they would have meant to someone in your culture 50 years ago.
2. One of the basic principles discussed in this module is that a text cannot mean something different than it meant to the author. Is the author the writer, or is it God Who inspired the writer? Explain your answer.
3. Write a one paragraph letter to a friend or family member. Looking carefully at each sentence, ask yourself if any sentence could mean two or more different things. Then review each sentence to see if you, the author, actually did intend for the sentence to mean more than one thing?

What would happen if the person you wrote the letter to failed to accurately interpret one or more of the sentences in your letter?

Can you think of any Bible passage where you think the author could mean two different things at the same time?

4. Is your primary Bible broken into verses or paragraphs?

If your Bible is broken into verses, do you know how to determine where new paragraphs start?

5. List three to five main passages that are used to “prove” both sides of the never-ending debate between the sovereignty of God versus the free will of man.

Use the steps outlined in this module to thoroughly evaluate the passages. After studying the passages, what do you conclude?

6. List a few passages of the Bible that you find difficult to understand.

Use the steps outlined in this module to thoroughly evaluate the passages. Did you discover what the passages mean?

7. List three beliefs you disagree with that you are often confronted with from other Christians.

What passages in the Bible do those Christians claim their belief is based upon?

Thoroughly study the passages and interpret them according to the principles in this module. What do you think now?