

How To Read Your Bible

1. Basic Bible Interpretation

2. The Historical Setting
3. The Grammatical Setting
4. The Scriptural Setting

Introduction to the Course

Have you ever tried to talk to someone about a Bible passage only to have them answer, "That's just your interpretation?" Some people suggest that there is really no right or wrong way to read and understand the Bible. They are satisfied to believe that everyone who reads it will get something a little different out of it. But this is God's book, so it is silly to think that He just leaves it up to the reader to decide what He is trying to say. There is a proper way to read and "interpret" the sacred Scriptures, and that way is not very difficult.

This four-part study *How To Read Your Bible* is based on the book *Biblical Interpretation: The Only Right Way* by David Kuske, published in 1995 by Northwestern Publishing House. Kuske's book may be read as supplementary material to these Bible classes, but it is not required.

Basic Bible Interpretation

Interpretation is simply _____

When we interpret the Bible, we are simply trying to _____

When we read a book, how do we determine what particular words mean?

An Illustration

Look at the following sentences. What does the word *church* mean in each one? How do you know? How would you *interpret* the meaning of each?

- A. We went to church last Sunday.
- B. Tomorrow they will put a new roof on the church.
- C. The church gave each of the graduates a gift.

You can tell what the word *church* means in each sentence because the words around it make it clear what it means. The *context* of a word helps you understand its meaning. In fact, without context, we would not understand much of anything that we read.

Context Matters!

We apply the same principle when we interpret the Bible. In order to understand what a particular word or sentence means, we need to know the context. If we are not immediately sure what a word or passage is saying, we look at how it "fits in" to the whole paragraph, the whole chapter, or the whole book.

The purpose of Biblical interpretation (or any interpretation, for that matter) is:

To determine the meaning that the original writer had for the original reader

When we read the Bible, we will not want to:

- Add our own ideas to what God says
- Change His words to say something different
- Claim that His words mean something different than what they say

God does not try to hide His word from us. The Bible is His way of communicating information that He wants us to have. He says what He means! It's that simple. In fact, SAYS = MEANS is the basis for *any* communication between *any* two parties. If what is said is *not* what is meant, no communication is possible.

SAYS = MEANS

In seeking to determine what the Bible says and what it means, we run into two significant "gaps" between us and the original writers and readers.

The Language Gap

When we read the Bible, we are reading a document that was written in languages other than English – Hebrew in the case of the Old Testament and Greek in the case of the New Testament. Before we can even begin to understand what the words say and mean, we must have a reliable *translation*.

Translation (Biblical and otherwise) is made difficult by two factors:

A. _____

B. _____

א בראשית ברא אלהים את השמים
ואת הארץ: ² והארץ היתה תהו ובהו
וחשך על־פני תהום ורוח אלהים מרחפת
על־פני המים: ³ ויאמר אלהים יהי אור
ויהי־אור: ⁴ וירא אלהים את־האור כי־
טוב ויבדל אלהים בין האור ובין
החשך: ⁵ ויקרא אלהים לאור יום

The Old Testament was written down in the Hebrew language. This section is from Genesis 1:1-5. Hebrew is a very "picturesque" language. Why do you think God chose this language for the books of the Old Testament?

The New Testament was written down in the Greek language. This section is from John 19:28-31. Greek is a very precise language. The word translated "it is finished" has a shade of meaning that is difficult to express in English.

28 Μετα τοῦτο εἰδὼς ὁ Ἰησοῦς ὅτι ἡ ὥρᾴ πάντα τετέλεσται, ἵνα ἡ τελειωθῇ ἡ γραφή, λέγει· διψῶ. 29 σκεῦος ἔκειτο ὄξους μεστόν· (σπόγγον οὖν μεστόν τοις ὄξους ὑσσώπῳ περιθέντες) προσήνεγκαν αὐτοῦ τῷ στόματι. 30 ὅτε οὖν ἔλαβεν τὸ ὄξος ὁ [ὁ] Ἰησοῦς εἶπεν· τετέλεσται, καὶ κλίνας τὴν κεφαλὴν παρέδωκεν τὸ πνεῦμα. 31 Οἱ οὖν Ἰουδαῖοι, ἑπεὶ παρασκευὴ ἦν, ἵνα μὴ μείνη ἐπὶ τοῦ σταυροῦ τὰ σώματα ἐν τῷ σαββάτῳ, ἣν γὰρ μεγάλη ἡ ἡμέρα ἔκείνου τοῦ σαββάτου, ἠρώτησαν τὸν

Why do you think God chose the Greek language for the books of the New Testament?

Most of the English translations available today are very good. You can be confident that when you read them they are faithfully representing the original text of the Bible.

King James Version (KJV) – Originally translated in 1611, this Bible has gone through many revisions. It is probably not the best choice for the 21st century reader since the English vocabulary and sentences can be difficult to understand.

New King James Version (NKJV) – This is a modern update of the KJV. It tries to simplify some of the difficult language of the older translation.

New International Version (NIV) – This is the Bible in modern English, translated to be understood by English speakers worldwide.

New American Standard Bible (NASB) – This is a translation that tries to follow the original word-for-word. This makes for unnatural sounding English from time to time, but it is a good study Bible if you want to see even the Greek and Hebrew word order in English.

An American Translation (AAT) – Translated by William Beck, this Bible accurately renders the original text in modern, simple English.

New World Translation (NWT) – **DO NOT read this Bible!** This is the "translation" made by the Jehovah's Witnesses. They do not faithfully reproduce the text of the original languages, but they change passages to fit their own teachings.

In practice, it's not a bad idea to have three translations at your disposal: The one you are most familiar with, one that you use for studying, and one that you use for reading large sections easily (e.g. KJV, NASB, NIV) .

The Culture Gap

We are also subject to a culture gap when we read the Bible. We do not live in the same time and place, nor do we have the same customs and manners as people living in Bible times had. When we read, there will be times when we will not fully understand the meaning unless we know the cultural context.

For example, when Jesus sent out the 72 missionaries He said:

└ Luke 10:3-4 Go! I am sending you out like lambs among wolves. Do not take a purse or bag or sandals; and do not greet anyone on the road.

To our ears, that sounds a little rude. They weren't supposed to say "hello" to anyone as they traveled? But the meaning becomes more clear when we understand the difference between what we call a "greeting" and what a "greeting" meant to the people of Palestine!

There are many passages where you must bridge this "cultural gap" in order to fully appreciate the meaning of the Scripture.

Proverbs 19:2 reads:

| A king's rage is like the roar of a lion, but his favor is like dew on the grass.

How is that to be understood? The first part makes sense easily enough, but not so much the second part. "Dew on the grass" in our culture is thought of more as an irritation than a "favor". It binds up our lawn mowers, keeps the farmers out of their fields, etc. In Palestine, however, the dew was vital. With such little rain, they needed it for their crops. A morning with heavy dew was considered a great blessing.

You could still understand what God was trying to say in that passage even without knowing about the dew in Palestine, but understanding the culture gives you a much fuller grasp of the meaning.

The Spiritual Gap



If you don't completely understand the language or the culture of Bible times, God will still be able to communicate with you through the Scriptures. The *spiritual gap*, however, presents a much more serious issue. If, for example, you don't believe that you are a sinner or that Jesus died for your sins, the meaning of the entire Scripture will not be clear to you or make sense to you.

Listen to 1 Corinthians 2:14:

| The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.

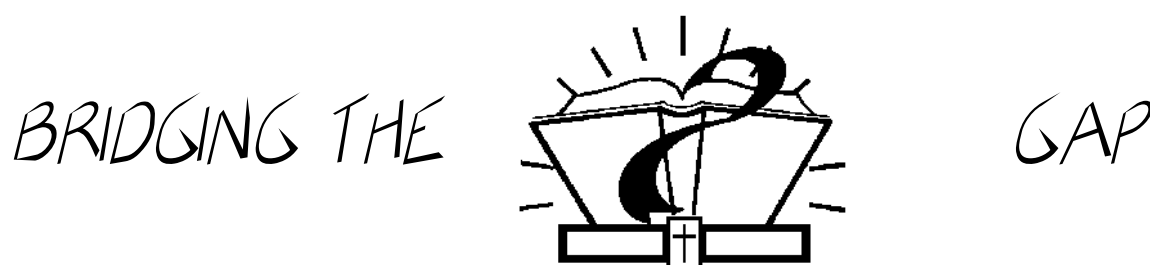
How does this passage relate to Biblical interpretation?

Will a person who considers the Bible to be foolishness do a good job interpreting it?

Is there such thing as a "open" or "neutral" mind when it comes to reading the Scriptures? (Think about this question in the light of Matthew 12:30 and Romans 8:5-7.)

"Because the unbeliever either cannot understand or cannot accept the spiritual meaning of the words of Scripture, he will either deny their meaning or change the meaning to something he can accept. In either case, he sets aside the equation that is basic to all communication (SAYS = MEANS). Then he also has to make up an excuse why he can do this with the Bible even though he can't do this with any other written book or document" (Kuske, 17).

Now this: Does the Bible have the power to change its readers' minds?



In order for the spiritual gap to be bridged and proper interpretation to result, two presuppositions are *required* on the part of the Bible reader:

A. All Scripture centers in Christ (Christocentric)

Luke 24:27 And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

2 Peter 3:2 I want you to recall the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets and the command given by our Lord and Savior through your apostles.

B. All the words of the Bible are God's Word (verbally inspired and inerrant)

2 Peter 1:21 For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

1 Corinthians 2:13 This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words.

| 2 Timothy 3:16 All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness,

Sometimes these two truths are called "presuppositions of faith", because the Holy Spirit both leads us to believe in Christ as our Savior and He gives us the certainty that the Bible is true.

Summary

- Context is the key factor in interpreting what words mean
- SAYS = MEANS is the basis for communication and interpretation
- When reading your Bible, be aware of the language gap
- When reading your Bible, be aware of the culture gap
- Only a believer can successfully bridge the spiritual gap

Notes

John 19:37-42

K.J.V.

37And again another Scripture saith, They shall look on him whom they pierced.

38 And after this Joseph of Arimathea, being a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, besought Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus: and Pilate gave *him* leave. He came therefore, and took the body of Jesus. 39And there came also Nicodemus, (which at the first came to Jesus by night,) and brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pound *weight*. 40 Then took they the body of Jesus, and wound it in linen clothes with the spices, as the manner of the Jews is to bury. 41 Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden; and in the garden a new sepulchre, wherein was never man yet laid. 42 There laid they Jesus therefore because of the Jews' preparation *day*; for the sepulchre was nigh at hand.

R.S.V.

shall be broken." 37And again another scripture says, "They shall look on him whom they have pierced."

38 After this Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly, for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus, and Pilate gave him leave. So he came and took away his body. 39 Nicodemus also, who had at first come to him by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds' weight. 40 They took the body of Jesus, and bound it in linen cloths with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews. 41 Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb where no one had ever been laid. 42 So because of the Jewish day of Preparation, as the tomb was close at hand, they laid Jesus there.

PHILLIPS

And again another scripture says—

They shall look on him whom they pierced.

After it was all over, Joseph (who came from Arimathea and was a disciple of Jesus, though secretly for fear of the Jews), requested Pilate that he might take away Jesus' body, and Pilate gave him permission. So he came and took his body down. Nicodemus also, the man who had come to him at the beginning by night, arrived bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. So they took his body and wound it round with linen strips with the spices, according to the Jewish custom of preparing a body for burial. In the place where he was crucified, there was a garden containing a new tomb in which nobody had yet been laid. Because it was the preparation day and because the tomb was conveniently near, they laid Jesus in this tomb.

N.E.B.

And another text says, 'They shall look on him whom they pierced.'

After that, Pilate was approached by Joseph of Arimathea, a disciple of Jesus, but a secret disciple for fear of the Jews, who^a asked to be allowed to remove the body of Jesus. Pilate gave the permission; so Joseph came and took the body away. He was joined by Nicodemus (the man who had first visited Jesus by night), who brought with him a mixture of myrrh and aloes, more than half a hundredweight. They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen cloth according to Jewish burial-customs. Now at the place where he had been crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb, not yet used for burial. There, because the tomb was near at hand and it was the eve of the Jewish Sabbath, they laid Jesus.

The Bible has been translated into more than 2,000 languages and dialects and it has sold more copies than any other book in the history of the world.