

# How To Read Your Bible

1. Basic Bible Interpretation
2. **The Historical Setting**
3. The Grammatical Setting
4. The Scriptural Setting

## God's Book Is History

The Bible is accurate in all points, including all matters of history. Scripture is God's plan of salvation worked in the world, unfolded through the Old Testament and into the New Testament. Since the Bible relates historical events,

*The words of the Bible have a historical setting*

Although the Bible is "timeless" in the sense that its teachings are as relevant to our lives today as to generations past, the Scriptures were originally given at particular places and at particular times. Understanding the historical setting of a Bible passage or chapter can help us to grasp the full meaning which God wants to share with us.

## The Importance Of Knowing the Historical Setting

Consider the following sentence: "Isn't this fire beautiful?"



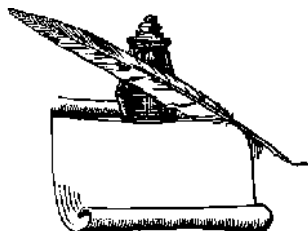
If you knew that this sentence was spoken around the campfire on an October evening in northern Wisconsin, you would know exactly what it meant.

If you knew that this sentence was spoken while the neighbor's house was going up in flames, it would sound a little strange and the meaning could be unclear.

Sometimes you need to *know the historical setting* behind the written word before you can fully understand it.

## Scripture Provides the Setting

Since God's word is accurate also in its historical points, the Bible itself often gives us the historical setting for a book or chapter. When God doesn't give us much information, then knowing the setting is not as important for our understanding of what is being said.



**Activity:** With the guidance of your pastor or in your own personal study, jot a few notes regarding the historical setting of each of the following books. Do we know much about the setting of each? Does knowing the historical setting enhance the meaning of chapters and passages within that book? If you have time, give examples.

- ACTS
- HEBREWS
- PHILIPPIANS

## Know the Author

Knowing something about the writer of a particular book of the Bible can be very helpful in understanding that book more fully. *The Bible tells us a lot* about many of the writers. For example:

1. What was the occupation of Amos and David? Does knowing that help you to appreciate some of the imagery in Amos and Psalms?
2. What was Paul before he was called to be an apostle? How did that affect the way he preached to the people? How does it "color" the things he says?
3. Where was going on in Paul's life when he wrote 2 Timothy? Does knowing the historical context help you to appreciate more the topics Paul treats in this letter?



*St. Paul At His Writing Desk*  
Rembrandt, 1630

## Know the People To Whom the Words Were First Written

Why do Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John seem so different sometimes even though they cover the same period of history? Some of it has to do with the original audience. John, for example, doesn't include certain details because by the time he wrote his gospel, the other three were already well known. What about the others – Matthew, Mark, and Luke? What do you know about those audiences? What do you notice about those books that reflects those audiences?

## The Social Situation

Knowing the social situation of Biblical figures may give you an added dimension of understanding to a Bible passage.

- Ruth was a Gentile (Ruth 1:4). Does being aware of that give an added dimension of beauty to her words in 1:16-17?
- Onesimus was a runaway slave (Philemon 16). Knowing that, what do you think of Paul's treatment of Onesimus in Philemon 17-18?

## The Cultural Situation

Obviously, there are differences between 21<sup>st</sup> century American culture and 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish culture. Being aware of the manners and customs of Bible times can greatly enhance one's understanding of certain passages.

- Understanding something about the common courtesies of foot washing, anointing with oil, and greeting with a kiss makes Jesus words in Luke 7:44-50 more striking to us.
- Knowing about the funeral custom of "wailing" helps us understand Jesus' words in Luke 8:52.
- A knowledge of Biblical marriage customs will give you a fuller understanding of John 2 (The Wedding at Cana) as well as other Scriptural references to marriage, bridegrooms, etc.

## Other Historical Situations

Depending on the section of Scripture you are reading, other historical settings might be important to the overall scene:

- The economic setting behind 2 Corinthians 8-9
- The educational situation of the Athenians in Acts 17
- The religious situation of the Pharisees and Sadducees
- The political situation in Genesis (Joseph), Exodus (Pharaoh), and Daniel (Nebuchadnezzar)
- The geographical situation (stories involving the Red Sea, the Jordan River, the Sea of Galilee, etc.)
- Where does a passage occur with respect to God's plan of salvation? Long before Jesus was born? Shortly before? Shortly after?

Sometimes secular history books can help fill in certain details of custom, geography, etc., but remember that these books are not necessarily infallible as is the case with God's written word.

*"The Bible reader must acquaint himself with all that can be known about the special circumstances of the person or people about whom portions of Scripture are written or to whom they are addressed. This information is often a key to fully and rightly understanding what the words of Scripture say and mean" (Kuske, 66).*

*"The Bible interpreter does not study the historical setting in order to alter or change what Scripture says. Rather, he studies it only that he might understand both fully and rightly what the inspired author has written" (Kuske, 67).*