



# How To Read Your Bible

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

## The Simple Meaning Of Words

In order to communicate, words have to mean what they say. When we read something that someone has written, we don't have a right to change the meaning of the words to make it say something it does not say. For example, consider this brief news report:

ST. JOSEPH, MI - Swimmers enjoy the mild water temperatures of Lake Michigan on Tuesday at Silver Beach in St. Joseph. The temperature reached a high of 75 on Tuesday and is expected to soar into the 80s on Thursday through Sunday.

Now what if I told you that the word "swimmers" actually means "people who are fishing", and that "Silver Beach" means "the whole area coastline", and the word "temperature" in the second sentence actually means "humidity". If you change the meaning of words like that, it disturbs the entire communication.

It is the same way with the Bible. We cannot take the words God has given to us and say, "Well, they actually mean something else." Those who don't agree with what God says or don't like what He says, sometimes like to suggest that the words of Scripture don't really mean what they say.

- **Evaluate and Discuss:** *"The inspired words of Scripture must be understood only according to the one obvious sense that they convey in common usage. Otherwise what God wants to communicate to us through these words is not what he wants to say to us but what we decide we want to hear him say to us" (Kuske, 70).*

## The Trouble With Allegorizing

To *allegorize* means to understand words in a sense other than their normal, obvious sense. When people allegorize Scripture, they distort the God-intended meaning. The Italian Catholic scholar Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) lived during an time when allegorizing the Bible was very popular. Here is an example . . .

Isaiah 11:1 says: "And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots" (KJV).

1. Aquinas said a "rod" does not mean what it says (the shoot of a tree), but it means "the virgin Mary", so he concluded that . . .
2. Since Moses used a rod to divide the Red Sea and thereby console the Israelites, Mary is one who consoles Christians in tribulation . . .
3. Moses' rod was used to draw water from a rock for Israel, so Mary gives Christians comfort in their trials . . .
4. Since a rod was used to smite Moab, Mary also scourges Christians when they sin.



- Do you see the problem with changing the meaning of words in the Bible? By changing the common meaning of a word (in this case, "rod"), Aquinas "read more into" the words of Isaiah than what the prophet was actually saying.

Sometimes the Bible does use what we call *picture language* (or *figurative language*), but *picture language does not actually change the meanings of words*. It uses the common meanings to "draw" an illustration in our minds of a particular truth.



"I am the Vine, you are the branches" <-- **Picture Language**

Notice that "vine" still means "grapevine" and "branches" still means "branches" (the meaning of the words hasn't changed), but Jesus uses these words to illustrate for us the close relationship we have to Him. The passage from Isaiah given above is also an example of picture language.

## Scripture Is Clear

The Bible does not have to be decoded or read only by the scholarly in order to be understood. "The meaning of its words is that which is conveyed by common usage" (Kuske, 72). *God means what He says*. Look at these Bible passages:

2 Timothy 3:15

Psalms 19:7

Psalms 119:130

- **Evaluate and Discuss:** There is only one God-intended meaning for every Bible passage.

## Finding the Plain Meaning Of a Bible Passage

We have established that we take the simple, common meaning of words when we read our Bibles, but how do we learn the meanings of the words of Scripture?

- **Etymology** (the history of a linguistic form)  
Looking at the meaning of a root word or a related word might help to understand what a word means. Using a word's etymology to determine its meaning can be misleading, though, so this method should be used with care. For example, knowing the history of the word "pea" won't help you understand what it means when it is used to describe in connection with playing baseball. The etymology of a word doesn't always match the usage.

The word ἀφίημι in Greek, however, is an example where the etymology does match the usage. It literally means "to send away" and it is often used with the meaning "to forgive." This is exactly what God does when He forgives our sins. He "sends them away."

- **Word Usage**  
This is the best way to determine the simple meaning of the word. Look at how people use that word! What is the common meaning of it everyday speech? In reading the Bible, keep these three basics of word usage in mind:

1. **The usage in the immediate context takes precedence.**  
Read the following Bible passages:

Acts 27:34 Just before dawn Paul urged them all to eat. "For the last fourteen days," he said, "you have been in constant suspense and have gone without food—you haven't eaten anything. Now I urge you to take some food. You need it to **survive**. Not one of you will lose a single hair from his head."

Acts 4:12 **Salvation** is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be **saved**."

The words in bold print are all *the same word* in the original Greek. In the context, however, it is clear that the usage in Acts 27:34 is different than the usage in Acts 4:12.



2. **Biblical usage takes precedence over non-biblical usage.**

The way a word is used in the Bible is more important than the way it is used outside the Bible when trying to determine the meaning of a word.

**βαπτίζω** – What did it usually mean in classical Greek usage? What does it mean the way the Bible uses it (See Luke 7:3-4)?

3. **The everyday usage of Words in Bible times is important.**

Some of the "theological" terms in the Bible are words that were taken from everyday usage. When the Bible was written, what was the basic meaning of these familiar terms:

redeem \_\_\_\_\_

justify \_\_\_\_\_

sin \_\_\_\_\_

transgress \_\_\_\_\_

**Activity:** Using a concordance or with your pastor's help, look up a few Bible passages that use these "theological" words. Does knowing the basic meaning of these words help you understand those passages more clearly?

*WORD USAGE is the definitive way  
of establishing word meanings*

## Syntax Helps Determine Word Meaning

Syntax is the collection and arrangement of words in a sentence. The way words are grouped together can make the meaning clear. In English, for example, word order makes a big difference. Here are two sentences that use the same words (and the same meanings for those words), but the sentences say completely different things:

The dog bit Jane.

Jane bit the dog.

In the Bible languages, things like word order, kinds of words, and tenses of words are important just as they are in other languages. A good translator must be aware of all these things in order to render a Bible verse properly in English. When you read your Bibles in English, the English sentence should use the words correctly and help you determine what the meaning of a passage is.

## Genre Helps Determine Word Meaning

Here are two sentences using the word *spying*:

The lazy sun is spying on the earth below.

The investigator continued spying on the alleged thief.

What does the word *spying* mean in each case? Well, the context would help you some. It might also help you to know that the first sentence is from a poem and the second sentence is from a crime novel. *Sometimes the same word is used differently depending on the type of writing that is involved.* The fancy word *genre* simply means the category or type of a particular book or writing.

What are the types of writing (genres) in the Old Testament?

-----

-----

-----

What are the types of writing (genres) in the New Testament?

-----

-----

-----

The above divisions are very broad. Portions of Scripture are not always just one type of writing. Any book or chapter or portion of a chapter may be a combination of two or more genres.

## Activities



DANIEL IN THE LIONS' DEN

- Take a few minutes and page through the book of Daniel. Can you identify several distinct types of writing (genres) within the book? Is there a specific point in the book where the genre clearly changes? How would you interpret the words of the various genres differently?



- Here are some Biblical genres (some of which you listed earlier) . What are some of the characteristics of the words and language used in each?

Apocalypse -

Poetry -

Epistle -

Narrative -

Prophecy -

Teaching -

Genre makes a difference. For example, if the book of Revelation talks about a lamb with seven horns and seven eyes you can understand that it is picture language because that is the type of book it is (it is John's dream). If the book of Exodus (a narrative) were to talk about a lamb with seven horns and seven eyes, it would seem very strange indeed and you might have a hard time figuring out what it meant.

## Figurative Language (Picture Language)

The Bible, like other works of literature, contains figurative language (sometimes also known as picture language). This idea was introduced back on page two of this lesson.

Figurative language help make difficult concepts more clear. It is intended to *clarify, not obscure* the God-intended meaning. To determine whether a Bible passage is picture language or not, the interpreter asks two questions:

1. Does the writer or speaker indicate in direct words that he is using a figure of speech?
2. Does the context make it clear that the words must be taken figuratively?

*Genre is determined from the immediate context or from clear references elsewhere in the Bible (Kuske, 85).*

*Those who alter the genre of a Scripture passage do so to deny or alter the meaning of that passage (Kuske, 85).*

In the earlier example using John 15:1, the context makes it clear that the words are picture language. (Obviously, Jesus is not a literal vine!)

## Activity

Here are some more Bible passages that use picture language to make the point clear. Look them up and identify the figure of speech. How does the figure of speech make the meaning more vivid?

Matthew 17:20

Matthew 25:33

Luke 17:24

Luke 13:32

Acts 1:25

Mark 7:9

John 21:25

- Remember that with figurative language the meanings of the words do not change, but words are simply used to "paint a picture" in our minds so that we understand a Bible truth more clearly.
- A *parable* is an extended figure of speech. The most important thing in understanding parables is identifying the point of comparison (the main thing Jesus is trying to teach) and sticking with it. Don't "allegorize" a parable.

## Summary

"In the Bible, God speaks in human language. Before the pages of Scripture can be understood theologically, they must be understood grammatically, that is, in terms of the common usage of the biblical languages" (Kuske, 104).

Looking at the context of a word, the meaning of a word, the way words are grouped (syntax), and the type of writing which includes the word (genre), the reader will be able to determine whether the word or sentence should be taken literally or figuratively.

"The task of the interpreter, then, is to find the one divinely intended sense of each passage since the only meaning of the words of Scripture is the simple, plain meaning" (Kuske, 104).

*When reading  
the Bible,  
understand  
the words in  
the simplest,  
plainest sense  
unless there  
are clear  
indications to  
understand  
them  
otherwise.*