

## I. Introduction to Bible Interpretation May 8, 2017

While most of the Bible is fairly easy to understand, some of it is not easy to understand without applying the rules of Bible interpretation. The reason we need Bible interpretation is to help us understand the meaning the original author meant for us to understand. Often, we have difficulty understanding the meaning of the original author and this is caused by differences such as language, time and culture between us and the original audience. Bible interpretation is how we build a bridge between the original author and us.

Christians agree that the Bible is the word of God. They believe that God has spoken to us clearly, and that there is only one correct interpretation of any Bible passage. This is the meaning God intended when he breathed his word into the human authors when the passage was written. A particular passage may have many applications, but it has only one meaning, and that is the meaning the author intended.

An example of this is found in 2 Corinthians 6:14. The meaning of this verse is that we must not join together with non-Christians. One application of this verse is that a Christian can only marry a Christian, we Christians are forbidden by God to marry a non-Christian. A second application is that a Christian is forbidden from becoming a business partner with a non-Christian.

How then can we determine the proper interpretation of scripture? The science of biblical hermeneutics seeks to provide a method to provide the correct interpretation. Proper hermeneutics will provide us with tools to help us ensure that we are basing our interpretation of the Bible on the truth from the word of God.

Using sound principles Bible interpretation is needed to understand the Bible. The Apostle Paul tells us to be “diligent to present ourselves approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth”. (2 Tim 2:15). This verse tells us to study the Bible to be able to understand and apply the teaching to our lives.

There are many people who think they should not study the Bible. They say that a person should just rely on the Holy Spirit to teach them. This is against what the Bible teaches us. In addition to what 2 Timothy 2:15 teaches Ezra 7:10 and Nehemiah 8:13 both talk about how in the Old Testament the leaders studied the scriptures. Also when we read about the life of Jesus we often read about Jesus teaching his followers. If you want to know about Jesus you must study the Bible, and you must put much time and effort into this study.

The purpose of these notes is therefore to provide a brief introduction to some basic principles of biblical interpretation.

## II. Facts to remember about the Bible.

### 1. Understanding or interpreting the Bible.

A. The apostle Peter reminded his readers that some things the Apostle Paul wrote are hard to understand. (2 Peter: 3:16).

B. There are some passages throughout the Bible which we don't fully understand. An example of this would be Genesis 6:2. We don't know who the sons of God are. Another thing we don't understand is found in Exodus 28:30 which talks about Urim and Thummim. We see these words several times in the Old Testament and we don't know exactly what they mean.

C. The Bible teaches us that we aren't expected to understand everything, and this is all right. Deuteronomy 29:29 and Isaiah 55:8-9 teach us that God does not reveal everything to us and that He thinks differently than we do.

D. The things we don't understand are not very important. The important teachings from the Bible are easy to understand and they are repeated for emphasis.

i. Everybody, even unbelievers, can understand much of the Bible, however the deeper truths of the Bible can't be understood and believed by non-believers. This is because we need the Holy Spirit to understand the deeper teachings of the Bible. We can't understand much of what God's word means and how to apply it unless we have the Holy Spirit guiding and helping us. See Ephesians 3:5 and 1 Corinthians 2:14 to read this.

ii. Repeating this, Unbelievers can't understand most of the Bible because the Holy Spirit is needed for this and only Christians have the Holy Spirit. Read 1 Corinthians 1:18 where the Apostle Paul says that the message of the cross is foolishness to the lost.

## 2. God inspired the Bible

A. It is God's action (2 Tim.3:16) and God's will that we have the written Bible. Men spoke and wrote the Bible as they were led by the Holy Spirit.

2 Peter 1: 20-21

B. Christians believe that the Bible is divine truth, has authority, is without mistakes, and is sufficient for instruction. We must accept and obey the rules of the Bible. These laws are from God Himself. A Christian must believe and obey every teaching in the Bible. If we don't believe in even one rule then we really don't believe any of the Bible. We humans are not able to pick and choose what we will believe. Only God can do this and He already chose the entire Bible.

C. The Bible is the very word of God. Yes, men wrote the Bible, and they wrote with their own language and style. But they spoke as they were instructed by the Holy Spirit.

i. This means they spoke God's words. What they have to say is not from their own knowledge. They are not the origin of the truth they speak; they are the channel. God used the human authors of the Bible to deliver His words to us. This truth is God's truth. Their meaning is God's meaning. God speaks His message through the human authors of the Bible.

ii. Not only is *what* they wrote from God, but how they wrote was controlled by the Holy Spirit. God did not simply reveal truth to the writers of Scripture and then depart in hopes that they might communicate it accurately. Peter says that in the very communicating of it they were carried by the Holy Spirit. The making of the Bible was not left to human skills of communication; God the Holy Spirit himself carried the process to completion. 2 Peter 1:21

iii. This does not mean that God dictated every word. Rather his Spirit so invaded the mind of the human writer that the author chose out of his own vocabulary and experiences precisely those words, thoughts and expressions that conveyed God's message with precision. In this sense the words of the human authors of Scripture can be viewed as the word of God.

iv. Paul also teaches that all scripture is inspired and good for teaching. This is reported in 2 Timothy 3:16 All the Bible including the Old Testament is truth from God as men, moved by the Holy Spirit, wrote God's words.

Everything we know about God is found in the Bible. Remember this very important rule. "Do not believe anything you hear someone say about God unless you know that what this person says is in the Bible." Make the person show you in the Bible and if he can't show you then do not believe him because what he says is not true.

3. The Bible has no mistakes.

A. In the original writings there are no errors.

B. Our present Bibles have a few differences but the meaning of the Bible is preserved. God has protected the message of the Bible, but He didn't give a perpetual miracle to preserve the manuscript from copyist errors. These errors where the human copyist made mistakes are not important. Look at and compare the following verses:

2 Samuel 10:18 reports 700 chariots and 1 Chronicles 19:18 reports 7,000.

2 Kings 24:8 king was 18 years old and 2 Chronicles 36:9 he was 8 years old.

1 Ki. 4:26 and 2 Chronicles 9: 25 differ on number of horses.

These errors made by the person copying the Bible are not important.

C. Good Bible translations: KJV; ESV and NASB are a few of the good translations available. Modern translations such as ESV and NASB are made by going back to the oldest copies of the original language text which still exist, and translating as accurately as they can.

D. Avoid false translations which seek to teach heretical doctrines such as New World Translation which comes from the Jehovah's Witness. Beware of it and also the Book of Mormon. The cults change the Bible to try to make their false beliefs believable. Only the original Bible is true.

i. Look at the following comparison between the real Bible and a false teaching from the Jehovah's Witness bible:

John 1:1 from the true Bible says: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

The false teaching from the Jehovah's bible adds a word and says, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was a god."

Adding the word "a" changes the whole meaning of this verse. The original meaning of the verse as stated in the real Bible is that Jesus is the real God who has always existed and is part of the Trinity.

The Jehovah's Witness do not believe that Jesus is Lord and they do not believe in the Trinity. Putting the letter "a" makes Jesus like an Angel and not the only supreme God that Jesus really is.

E. The newest version of the NIV should be avoided because it has changed many of the words from he or him to they or them. You can identify the version to avoid because it is copyrighted. The NIV copyrighted 1984 is good to use. The newer versions are not to be trusted.

4. Unity of the Bible: It is composed of 66 books, written by 40 human authors of different backgrounds, education, and at different times over 1600 years but still one book. This is because God is the primary author.

5. Christ is the central message in the whole Bible. The Old Testament looks forward to the coming of Jesus Christ and The New Testament looks back to His coming and the cross.

Bible Interpretation includes rules, principles, and methods for interpreting the Bible. It is the process of trying to understand the original meaning of the verses and what it means to us today. The purpose of Bible interpretation is to bridge the time and cultural differences between ancient times and today so that we can understand the original meaning of the Bible and how it applies to us today.

A. So, its purpose is to find the meaning of the author for the people he wrote to and determine the meaning in application for the modern audience. Some of the laws given in the Old Testament are not in effect today such as the laws prohibiting eating pork.

B. There are three types of laws in the Old Testament. Only one of these is to be obeyed by Christians.

i. One of these laws is civil laws. These laws are the laws governing Israel in Bible times when Israel was a kingdom. The old kingdom of Israel does not exist any longer so these laws are not valid today.

ii. A second type of laws are the ceremonial laws which we don't obey anymore. An example is that we are not to sacrifice animals. Hebrews 10:10-14 teaches us that Jesus was the perfect and final sacrifice; there is no need for future sacrifices.

iii. The third type of law is the moral laws such as the Ten Commandments which are to be obeyed by all Christians.

6. The Bible is authoritative.

A. The Bible is from God; all of it is to be obeyed unless the Bible itself says it is not necessary to obey something such as Acts 10:9-16 which says all food is edible.

## II. Why we need Bible Interpretation

1. Bible interpretation is necessary because we do not live in the times and culture of the writers. The picture is that Bible writers are on one side of a big river and we are on the other side. Bible interpretation is the way we bridge the river so that the original message of the Bible can cross the river to us so that we can understand this original message.

There are some things which the people of Bible times understood, but even using rules of interpretation we still don't understand the meaning. An example of this as mentioned earlier is that we don't understand Urim and Thummim even though the people of Bible times clearly did. We see this phrase several times in the Old Testament. Exodus 28:30 and Numbers 27:21 The things we do not clearly understand are not the important teachings of the Bible.

A. Be careful about believing the person who says he understands every word in the Bible because he doesn't.

## III. General methods of interpretation

1. Importance of good observation. Consider Luke 17:21 "for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you."

A. To understand the meaning, look closely at the passage and ask and answer questions such as:

i. Who was speaking? Jesus was speaking

ii. Why was he speaking? He was answering a question.

- iii. What question? When is the kingdom of God coming?
- iv. Who asked the question? The Pharisee
- v. What were the Pharisees? They were a religious group who opposed Jesus.
- vi. Who was Jesus? He was the Son of God, the Messiah. He is the King of the kingdom.

B. Using these questions and sometimes others, we can interpret this verse. We know that these Pharisees were not Christians so we know that the Kingdom was not in them. We know that Jesus is the king of the kingdom so this must mean that the kingdom of God as represented by King Jesus is among them.

C. The correct use of words is very important. The Sadducees did not believe in life after death. Jesus proved that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were still alive by saying in verse 32 that, "I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob"? He is not God of the dead, but of the living." Here the word am proves these men are still alive. This proves that the Sadducees were wrong because there is life after death and we had better make sure that we spend eternity in heaven.

D. Take your time as you read and observe the text. Read it many times. Read, pray, think and repeat this to help understand the Bible. The Bible often reveals its meaning slowly over time. I am an old man and everytime I read the Bible I discover new meaning to the verses.

E. Here is another example for practice: John 5:24 truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes Him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.

- i. What are the important words? They are truly, eternal life, judgment, and death.
- ii. How are these words connected? Jesus uses the word "but" to connect death with life.
- iii. Who is speaking? Jesus is speaking.
- iv. Who is Jesus speaking to? He is speaking to the Jews.
- v. What is the attitude of the audience? The Jews were so hostile that they plan to kill Him
- vi. What can we observe about the grammar? This means that as soon as a person is saved, he has passed into eternal life.

F. The correct interpretation is that Jesus had something very important for the people to hear. He is saying that eternal life is not something you get in the future; it is something you receive now. The importance of this verse is that He was talking about the difference between eternal death and eternal life. He is saying that the believer is forgiven from his sins and will live in Heaven with Jesus forever. In other words when a person is saved he is permanently saved and will go to heaven no matter what.

2. Other questions you should ask to help understand the passage is, who wrote or spoke the passage and to whom was it addressed? What is the reason for the passage?

A. It is important to understand the author of a particular passage, his background and the cultural factors that may have influenced his writing. More importantly we need to grasp the author's purpose and plan in writing a particular book. For example, John, in John 20:31, states his purpose for writing the gospel, "but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the son of God and that by believing you may have life in his name". John states his purpose clearly in the gospel, but it is not always easy to find the author's purpose. The following suggestions may help you in finding the author's purpose and plan.

B. Note whether the purpose is stated or not. If it is not stated, are there any hints or indications of it? Nowhere does Paul in his letters to the Corinthians clearly state his purpose but we can discover his purpose by comparing 1 Corinthians 1:11, 3:3&4, 4:6, 5:6, etc. From these passages we learn that there were serious problems in the church. The people were challenging Paul's authority and apostleship. Paul wrote to correct the problems. Think like a police detective and look for clues to help understand a passage.

C. Personal reference to the readers usually indicates the book's purpose. Themes or subjects that are repeated or emphasized may suggest the authors plan and purpose. Matthew wrote his gospel partly at least to set forth the truth of the kingdom of heaven since he refers to it many times.

D. Look for the structure of the book. There may be division points such as Chapters. Remember that the chapters were put in the Bible by man and not God so there are mistakes. The original books of the Bible had no chapter divisions so it was often difficult to find a place in the book when there were no chapter divisions.

E. When the purpose and or plan is clear then study each portion of the book with the purpose in mind of being sure that your interpretation agrees with it. A good example is Philippians 2:1-8. It shows the purpose of the author. The phrases: the same mind, the same love, full accord shows that Paul wanted the Philippian Christians to copy Jesus and to show love for each other. He reminds them in Philippians 2:5-8 to follow Christ's example.

F. It helps to understand the message of the prophets by studying along with the historical book which is written about the same time in history. An example is to read Ezra chapters 5 &6 along with the books of Haggai and Zechariah because they all are written about the same time in history.

3. What does the passage say in easily understood words?

A. As you read a text from the bible, it is important to see a text as a communication between the author and yourself of which God is the primary author. It is for this reason that the reader should labor to search for the meaning of the text that the original author intended. Remember there is only one main meaning of the text.

B. Much of the Bible is easy to understand; don't make it more complicated than it really is.

C. Examine words for their original meaning and seek to understand them in today's world. The task here is to first find out how the original reader understood the words and phrases of the paragraph or text. Then we need to relate the original meaning to something we understand today.

i When Paul wrote Colossians for example, it was in the context of the false teaching of the time that he sought to correct. For this reason he used terms which were part of the heretic's vocabulary but he filled them with new meaning. A good example is Paul's use of the word mystery in Colossians 1:25-26. This was a term that was used by heretical thinkers to refer to the secret things which were known only to the few. Paul uses this word by filling it with a new meaning of God's plan of salvation that was not known before but is revealed now to everybody through the work of Jesus. The name of Jesus was a mystery in the Old Testament but now we know that Jesus is the name which saves us.

4. Before we can actually establish the meaning of the passage to us, it is important to examine the text and look at the words and phrases to see if the passage applies to us today. Remember not every passage applies to us today such as Leviticus 11:7 which

forbid the Jews to eat pork. Now the New Testament tells us in Act 10:9-15 that we can eat pork.

A. There are some passages or teachings that don't apply to us today. These are called **relatives**. For example, the ceremonial laws related to Israel's worship such as instruction for the tabernacle, priestly duties, and sacrifice rules that don't apply to us today.

B. Sometimes the original words are applied to us today in a separate way. An example is where Peter asks the church members to greet one another with a kiss of love. 1 Peter 5:14 Today the message is to greet each other with a friendly handshake.

i. It is also important to identify words and phrases that apply both to the original audience and to our time with no change. These are called **absolutes**. Examples of absolutes include, God forbids homosexual acts, Romans 1:27. The sin of homosexual behavior was wrong in Bible times and it is just as wrong today.

ii. We must be careful to not treat relatives as absolutes because this leads to legalism. An example is that while Jesus did wash his disciple's feet. We are not required to do this today.

C. What is the immediate context of the word or passage? Context means how the word is used. Many words, in English, have different meanings depending on how they are used.

5. Drawing conclusions from your reading.

A. What do I conclude about the passage? What do I understand from what I have just read?

B. What interpretations do others have about the passage? Be careful these other Christians are human and they can make mistakes. Do my conclusions agree or disagree with related areas of scripture and others who have studied the passage?

C. What have I learned and what must I apply to my life?

D. Remember there are no contradictions or errors in the Bible. If you think you have found a contradiction or error, you are the one who is wrong and not the Bible.

6. The importance of context. Often context determines the meaning of a particular word or text. By context we mean the way a word is used, and the setting or place.

A. An example is the word running. The child is running to school. President Museveni is running for reelection. We see that the word running has two different meanings depending on its use.

B. Another example we find is in the use of the word asleep in the Bible. It means to sleep in Matthew 28:13. It means dead in 1 Thessalonians 4:14

C. The Greek language used in the Bible often had different words and English and other languages only have one word which has different meanings depending on how it is used. An example of this is the English word for love. Greek has four words for love while English has one.

i. Greek word eros= romantic love between a husband and wife.

ii. Greek word philia= brotherly love such as the love one Christian has for another Christian.

iii. Greek word agape=the love God has for His children.

iv. Greek word storge= word for family love.

7. There are two types of contexts we need to consider as we interpret our Bible. These are historical context and literal context/ immediate context.

A. Historical Context

Often it is necessary to understand the historical background of a passage to understand what the meaning of a passage is.

i. A good example is the story of the Good Samaritan in the gospel as recorded by Luke 10:25-37. We know that the Jews hated the Samaritans. They hated them because, after the Jews of the Northern Kingdom were removed from their land by the Assyrians, the Samaritans were brought in and given the land formerly belonging to the Jews. When we know this then the story has new meaning for us because we better understand how big the Jew's hatred is for the Samaritans. The story about the Good Samaritan is a lesson about brotherly love which the Bible tells us we should have for our neighbor. Leviticus 19:18 As we read this story, in Luke, we see that the two Jews who are professional religious men ignore the hurt traveler, but the lowly Samaritan, a man despised by the Jews, helped the injured man even beyond what was expected. Who is the one obedient to God here, of course, it is the Samaritan.

Now that we understand the historical context, we can focus on the immediate context. What is the lesson for us today? The lesson for us from the above story is that we are to be good neighbors and help others even if they are from a different tribe.

B. Literal context or what the words say. Context determines the meaning of the word in a passage. We can change the meaning of a word when we take it out of context. A person who wants very strongly to get married can use the following verses out of context to prove he needs to quickly get married.

i. The last part of 1 Corinthians 7:36 says let them get married, or they should get married.

ii. John 13:27 says what you are doing-do quickly

iii. Do not connect these two verses because you want to marry as quickly as you can. These verses have no connection.

C. Pay attention to the surrounding context which means look at the surrounding verses to understand the meaning of the verse you are seeking to understand. For example, some people think family planning is wrong because they read Genesis 1:28 without reading the previous verses.

i. You must read Genesis 1:26-28 which says: Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth."

God is telling two people that they are to rule over the earth. Clearly they needed more than two people to help them rule and so God told them to multiply and fill the earth. Clearly today with 7,000,000,000 people on this earth we have obeyed this commandment to fill the earth and family planning is now acceptable.

D. Dangers of disregarding the literal context. By doing this, you can make the Bible say almost anything. This is the way cults often develop their false teaching.

E. Ignoring the surrounding literal context often results in misinterpreting the verse. Let's look at two examples:

i. Sometimes people use a verse out of context to prove something the Bible does not say. These people want the Bible to say something and so they misuse scripture.

ii. For example, when people want to prove that the Bible forbids drinking alcohol, they often use Luke 1:15 to prove their point. This is clearly wrong because this passage begins in verse 13 and is part of the special instruction the angel of the Lord was giving to the father of John the Baptist. It does not forbid the use of alcohol for anyone else. There are other passages which can be used to teach people to never drink alcohol in our society; a society which has so many alcoholics. One example is found in 1 Corinthians 8:9 or Romans 14:13 which tell us to give up our right to drink alcohol so that we won't cause someone else to fall.

iii. Some use Luke 10:9 and 19 to prove that we can heal others and that all Christians have other special powers. Actually the entire passage is Luke 10:1-19 which shows us that Jesus gave these special powers only to the seventy-two he was sending out, and not to anybody else. Only God can heal people.

F. It is very, very important to always read the surrounding verses and other similar verses in different parts of the Bible which are connected to the subject you are reading about. Only after considering the whole teaching, do you decide what a verse means.

#### IV. Factors to consider when interpreting the Bible.

1. The personal situation of the author and how it affects his writing. The author's situation often throws light on the meaning of the passage.

Many of the writings take new meaning when studied in the light of the situation from which the author wrote.

A. A good example is Psalm 51 which David wrote after committing adultery with Bathsheba and then murdering Uriah her husband. David wrote this with a repentant heart and he is freely confessing his sin and asking forgiveness. This chapter teaches us about true repentance.

2. We must understand the history of the Old Testament to understand the New Testament. For example, we can't begin to understand the book of Hebrews unless we understand the Old Testament.

A. Jesus made many Old Testament historic references to teach a point. Often we can use an Old Testament passage to interpret a passage in the New Testament. For example, Jesus referred to Numbers 21:4-9 when he told Nicodemus, "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the son of man be lifted up" By understanding the Old Testament history, we see a comparison. The Jews were told to look up to God for forgiveness and deliverance just as we look up to Jesus for the forgiveness of our sins.

3. Often sources outside the Bible such as history and geography books are helpful in better understanding a passage. For example the vision of the great image recorded in Daniel 2:31-45, predicts the rise of and fall of the four empires of Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome. History books can teach us much about these empires and help us better understand the Bible. For example, understanding Roman history helps us understand why tax collectors such as the Apostle Matthew were so despised and hated. It was because they were so corrupt and greedy.

A. Sometimes knowing more about the geography or topography can help you better understand the meaning of a passage. For example Jesus begins the parable of the Good Samaritan with the statement, "a man was going from Jerusalem to Jericho..." (Luke 10:30). We know that this was hilly country where thieves could easily work.

B. Knowing social customs often helps us understand passages such as Ephesians 5:21-6:9, for example you need to know something about Roman household codes in order to really understand the reason for this teaching.

i. The teaching of Ephesians were designed to instruct a Christian head of the household how to deal with his family. The social customs at that time told husbands to make their wives submit but they never listed love as a duty of the husbands. Paul, in Ephesians 5:25-31, teaches that the Christian husband has a tremendous duty to protect and love his wife.

C. Economic background is another important area of study. Ordinary people in Bible times were extremely poor, but we read in 1 Chronicles 29:9 and 2 Corinthians 8:1-5 that the poorest people in Bible times gave sacrificially. This teaches us that we also should give to God's work even if we are very poor. Luke 21:1-4 is an example for all of us.

D. It is helpful to understand the laws of the time. We read in Acts 16:37-39 that Paul as a Roman citizen had certain rights. These laws prevented him from being beaten and it allowed him to appeal to Caesar for trial in Rome.

E. Understanding these things often helps us understand the Bible better. An example of this is found in Psalm 23 which is a great Psalm of comfort for the Christian. We know that the shepherd took good care of his sheep so we see that the Lord takes good care of His people. He guides and directs us. We have nothing to fear because of the total care of the Good Shepherd who is Jesus.

## V. Meaning and application

1. Does the author or the writer determine the meaning? Some people feel that the reader is the one who should determine the meaning. This is wrong because it is the author who determines what the meaning of his words is. In the case of the Bible, God is the author and He wrote the Bible to teach us.

A. One of the most important principles regarding interpreting the Bible is that we don't create the meaning. Rather we seek to discover the meaning that has been placed there by the author. Our goal is to discover the meaning God created for us.

2. We need to define the meaning of the whole passage and its application.

A. Meaning is what the author intended to communicate when he wrote the text. Meaning is determined by the author even if we don't like what the author is saying.

i. An example is God's instruction about how to come to Him. We can only come to God through Jesus. This is what the author intended to communicate. John 14:6.

ii. Some people read this and believe the reader is free to understand and apply the verse the way the reader wants to. Some individuals and church denominations give their own desired meaning to John 14:6. They say their God is bigger than this and that God will allow all good moral people into heaven such as the good moral Muslim. This is very wrong. Only Christians are going to heaven.

B. Application is what the person does with the meaning of the passage. What we need to do with the above example from John 14:6 is make sure that we have Jesus as our Lord or we are not going to heaven.

3. Applying the meaning.

A. You can't apply the meaning of the Bible unless you know what the Bible means, but you can know what the Bible means and not apply it. Knowing what God demands from is useless unless we do what God demands.

i. A good example is in the area of missions. Matthew 28:18-20. If this command was obeyed more faithfully, then the whole world would be evangelized after two

thousand years, but it is not and many people have not heard the truth about Jesus. In the United States there are thousands of well trained seminary graduates who could go all over the world as missionaries but they prefer to stay home and enjoy the good life.

ii. Every Christian is supposed to be a missionary. As Acts 1:8 teaches, some of us are missionaries or evangelist in our home town and some of us go far away.

## VI. Understanding the Old Testament.

1. Here are five useful steps to help you interpret the Old Testament. All the steps are not used for each passage.

A. Step one is determining what the text meant to the original audience.

B. What are the differences between the Old Testament audience and us?

C. What is the principle of the text?

D. Does the New Testament modify the principle? Sometimes it does now, for example, we can now eat pork.

E. How do we apply what we read to our lives today?

2. The law or the Pentateuch.

A. The law is presented as part of the historical story of Israel.

B. The law is presented in a covenant context known as the Mosaic covenant.

Exodus Chapters 19-24.

C. Let us examine the Mosaic Covenant as it applies to Old Testament people and also how it applies to us:

i. God's blessings were dependent upon the obedience of the Israelite people in the Old Testament.

ii. We are not governed by the Mosaic covenant because it has been replaced by the New Covenant of God's grace.

iii. New Testament teaching is that while some Old Testament law does not directly govern us today, it contains many rich principles and lessons for living that are still relevant when viewed through New Testament teaching. For example, the Old Testament rules governing every part of worship teaches us that we must be careful to not invent worship. We see that God wants orderly worship and he wants worship from our repentant hearts.

iv. As we study the New Testament we see that we are not required to obey the ceremonial laws but the moral laws are still to be obeyed. So we can now eat pork but we must obey the Ten Commandments.

3. Old Testament Prophecy is sometimes easy to understand, but often it is very difficult to understand.

A. First we must determine if the author used literal language; we must determine this for every passage we read. We can assume that the passage is to be understood literally unless it is proven that it should be taken figuratively.

B. The way we determine the word or passage is to be taken figuratively is we determine if the word or passage used makes sense if interpreted literally. If it doesn't, it must be interpreted figuratively. Isaiah 55:12 is a good example. The mountains are not going to sing and the trees are not going to clap their hands so we must interpret this passage figuratively. Here the picture the author wants us to see is one of great rejoicing.

C. We must first analyze the writings of the prophets to interpret them.

i. Most often the message of the prophet was about the disobedience of the people and he promises punishment for this disobedience. Often there was a call to repent and forgiveness would follow, but sometimes God's patience was exhausted and punishment was coming. God warned people because He loves people.

ii. A few of the prophecies were about future times. In our time only about 1% is about prophecy is yet to come. Much of the future prophecy was about the first coming of Jesus and has been completed.

iii. We must know the historical-cultural context of the time of the author. Who did the prophet preach to?

iv. The basic message of the prophet was a message to the people of the time telling them the words of God and their meaning. The prophet of today also tells the people the meaning of God's words as found in the Bible. The person who is preaching and teaching about God from the Bible, and only from the Bible, is acting as a prophet, and he is the only kind of prophet we have today.

#### 4. Hebrew Poetry—the books of Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs.

A. A very large part of the Old Testament is written in poetical form so it is essential for Bible interpreters and preachers to know the leading characteristics of Hebrew Poetry.

Poetry often has a practice of saying the same thing twice (Parallelism). Parallelism has happily survived without misinterpretation. So it can be put into all languages of the world without loss of beauty or impressiveness.

B. Forms of poetry.

i. Parallelism is concerned with matching ideas and has several forms see Psalm 3:1-2 for an example.

ii. Synonymous: The ideas presented are similar (Psalm 25:4).

iii. Synthetic: The second thought completes the first thought. (Psalm 23:1).

iv. Antithetic: The second thought contrasts with the first (Psalm 1:6).

C. Poets wrote with an idea of pictures to pop into the reader's mind by creating visual images which is accomplished by figures of speech.

i. A metaphor is a **figure of speech**. It uses words, not literally, but figuratively. It takes a word from its original **context**, and uses it in another.

"I beat him with a stick" = literal meaning of 'beat'.

"I beat him in an argument" = metaphorical meaning of 'beat'.

We use metaphors to make indirect **comparisons**, but without using 'like' or 'as' – because that would be a **simile**. A simile is a *direct* comparison: "Jane is like a child".

D. While the Simile gently states that one thing is like or resembles another, the Metaphor boldly and warmly declares that one thing is the other.

While the Simile says "All flesh is like grass" (1 Peter 1: 24), the Metaphor carries the figure across at once, and says "All flesh IS grass" (Isaiah 40: 6). This is the distinction between the two.

The Metaphor is, therefore, not so true to fact as the Simile, but is much truer to feeling.

The Simile says "All we like sheep;" while the Metaphor declares that "we are the sheep of His pasture."

E. Hyperbole: deliberately overstates for the sake of emphasis. Psalm 6:6 is an example of overstating something.

F. One guideline for interpreting Hebrew Poetry is to interpret by the use of its context. Pay attention to indicators that help divide the passage into units of thought.

## VII. Interpreting the New Testament

### 1. Parables

A. A person who tells a good story will never lack an audience. Jesus was a great storyteller, and His stories were meant to impart spiritual information and wisdom. These are called the parables. Approximately 1/3 of Jesus Christ's teachings, as recorded in the gospels, are in the form of parables and Matthew wrote that he used them very often (Matthew 13:34). People remember good stories.

B. A parable is a true to life short story designed to teach a truth or answer a question. In Jesus' teaching the parable had an additional purpose. He told us in Matthew 13:10-13 that a purpose was to hide the truth from the unresponsive non-believer, while making it plain to the responsive believer. Another way of saying this is the true meaning of a parable is for the church only. He does this by using a common everyday story of life that can be easily understood by Christians.

C. Parables teach one primary lesson.

D. Here are four steps to understanding parables.

i. Begin with the immediate context. What is the main point of the story?

A. Look at Luke 15:11-32. We know this as the story of the prodigal son. What is the main point of the story? Jesus told this story to point out the difference between the unforgiving older son and the forgiving father who represents Jesus. He is teaching that we are to forgive others just as the father did which is the way Jesus forgives us.

E. Sometimes the meaning of the parable is given in application such as Matthew 24:44. Here the meaning is that we must be prepared for the fact that Jesus might come back at any instant.

F. Identify details that are not important. The parable in Luke 17:7-10 has many parts that are not important to the truth being taught. The part that is important is that we do not deserve credit for doing what is right.

G. Identify the relevant details.

i. The father running out to meet his son in the story of the prodigal son is a relevant detail. His running out showed his heart; that he was eagerly waiting for his son. This is the relevant detail.

### 4. More guidelines for interpretation of parables.

A. Usually a parable is intended to teach only one important lesson.

B. Sometimes the lesson may be discovered in the introduction to the parable e.g. Luke 18:1-8

C. Sometimes the object of the parable is revealed only at the end of the parable see Luke 15:3-10. Both verses 7&10 give us the one reason for this parable which is that every single Christian is very important to Jesus.

D. Never attach meaning to all the details that fill out the parable story. This is because one might be inventing meanings for the story that the Storyteller himself never intended. Make sure that you don't add wrong meanings to what you are reading.

E. We must not seek to establish any doctrine solely upon the basis of a parable. Do not take some details of a parable and make this the foundation of an important teaching. A parable may contribute to doctrine but all doctrines must come from literal passages. For example Mathew 25, which is the story about the five foolish virgins, does not teach any doctrine. It teaches that we must be prepared at all times for Christ to return. The doctrine teaching this we find in literal passages in other parts of the Bible such as Acts 1:11, John 14:3, Revelation 1:7.

## VII. Summary of our study

1 Most of the Bible and all the main teachings are to be read and understood just as they are written. The most important Bible teachings are very clear and are repeated so that we will not fail to get the message.

2. Use logic and common sense to understand some passages.

A. The different steps of text analysis follow one another with each step building upon the findings of the previous one until the message of the paragraph is finally established in this step.

They are progressive in the sense that each one in turn leads you nearer to establishing the meaning of the passage.

To draw the conclusion of the passage the reader is expected to use all the techniques we have previously discussed.

i. Let's take Colossians 1:21-23 as our example for which the steps have been identified as follows.

The Colossians are lost because of sin

They are saved because of Christ's death

God views them as morally pure because of Christ's work.

3. Ask yourself, do my interpretations agree with other Scripture? Your interpretation must agree with other Scripture because Scripture never disagrees with other Scripture. Use Scripture to interpret Scripture. There is a harmony of Scripture.

**Whenever the reader thinks that the Bible is contradicting itself, the problem is with the reader and not the Bible.** Use similar passages to help you understand what you are trying to interpret.

4. Does your interpretation agree with other people's interpretation? People can make errors, but you should look at what other people think a passage means before you decide they are wrong and you are right. It is good to hear the opinion of mature Christians to help when there are disagreements.

5. Read the Bible with an open mind and be prepared to learn and to change your mind. Do not approach the text with the idea that you already know what it means and you are not going to be influenced by the Bible.

A. An example is that some people believe that if a person attends a certain church he is automatically going to Hell and can't go to Heaven. They disregard the fact that Jesus judges each person individually and not as a group.

B. Jesus totally condemns the church in Sardis in Revelation 3:1. Yet in verses 4-5 He says there are a few of His people in the church. This means that there can be Christians in any church. Yet people who don't want to believe this ignore these Bible verses.

6. The best help you can get to interpret the Bible is from the Holy Spirit. Pray that God will help you. Years ago when, I first started teaching the Bible, I was teaching through the book of Isaiah. Often I could not understand a passage and I would be ready to give up. I would cry out to God for help and soon new understanding would come to me. 1 Corinthians 2:14

7. Chapter numbers and verse numbers are not part of the original writings of the Bible. Humans later added these to make it easier to find different places in the Bible. Sometimes a passage goes from the last verses of a chapter over into the next chapter. Don't allow the placement of a chapter or verse influence your understanding of the passage.

8. Do not build a doctrine based on one verse. Doctrines, such as salvation by faith and not by works, are taught throughout the Bible. See John 3:27; 6:52-65; Philippians 1:29; Acts 16:14; Acts 18:27; Ephesians 2:8-10, and others.

A. Often people misuse one verse to justify doing what they want to do. For example:

i. Matthew 19:12 is used by some churches to teach that church pastors should not marry. This is not a correct interpretation of the Bible.

ii. Various groups have misused Genesis 9:20-27 to justify making black people slaves and also this was used in South Africa to justify apartheid; some people say the mark put on Canaan, by Noah, was black skin, but this is clearly wrong. God loves all people the same; the color of their skin makes no difference.

VIII. Helpful ideas. If you have a Study Bible or Dictionary look up the meaning of the words used. In the case of a study Bible use the references in the margins or the footnotes at the bottom of each page to find other places where similar passages are shown. Use a concordance to lookup where words are found in the Bible.

IX. A final thought about interpreting the Bible concerns the help of God Himself. Pray and ask God to help you understand the meaning of a passage. As you struggle trying to understand the meaning, often the meaning remains hidden. You must really try with all your effort to understand what God is saying. If you just can't understand then stop and pray and ask The Holy Spirit to help you understand the meaning and often God will help you.