

THE BIBLE

WHY DO WE NEED TO INTERPRET THE BIBLE?

INTRODUCTION

“God said it, I believe it, and that settles it.” “I may not understand the Bible, but I believe it.” “You don’t have to interpret the Bible. Just read it and do what it says.” People make statements like these all the time.

They all come down to one common, practical question: “*Why can’t we simply read the Bible and understand it the way it is? Why do we need to interpret the Bible?*” “God said it, I believe it, that settles it.” Great! But what does a parent do when the Bible says, “***Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death***” (Ex. 21:17)? What about dietary laws such as Lev. 11:7-8: “***The pig...is unclean for you. You must not eat their meat or touch their carcasses; they are unclean for you***”?

In the Bible King Saul visits a medium (I Sam 28); should we today? The Bible lists six wives of King David (2 Sam 3:2-5); is this “biblical” now? Or do these passages need more study? One of Job’s friends offered this explanation for Job’s suffering: “***Who, being innocent, has ever perished? Where were the upright ever destroyed? As I have observed, those who plan evil and those who sow trouble reap it.***” (Job 4:7-8). Does this passage teach that suffering is always our fault? In other words, if we would just repent and believe, would we always be well and wealthy? Or, do we need to study further?

Just because an interpretation is popular, that doesn’t make it right. Consider these examples. After chloroform was developed in England, doctors wanted to use it to help women with childbirth. However, women refused because of Gen 3:16—“***with pain you will give birth to children.***” It was only after it was shown from Gen. 2:21 that God “***caused the man to fall into a deep sleep***” to create woman that women would accept chloroform.

When the first oil wells were dug in Pennsylvania, many ministers opposed this project. They argued from 2 Pet. 3:10, 12 that this would deplete the oil stored in the earth for the final burning of the world. Winoing fans were rejected for years on the basis of John 3:8 as interfering with God: “The wind blows wherever it pleases.”

It is possible for one to be sincere in regards to the Bible and yet be sincerely wrong as you can see from the above.

WHAT IS BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION?

What does it mean to “interpret” the Bible? Webster defines “interpret” as “*to explain the meaning of; make understandable.*” Interpreting the Bible, then, is understanding and explaining what the Bible means. Someone prayed correctly when he prayed, “*Lord, teach us today what Your word says, and what it means by what it says.*”

When you interpret the Bible, you are doing biblical “hermeneutics.” “Hermeneutics” is the term scholars use for interpreting any kind of language. The word itself comes from Hermes,

the Greek god who was believed to bring the words of the gods to mortals. He was for them the god of science, invention, eloquence, speech, writing, and art. From then to now, “hermeneutics” has been the study of language and speech.

Biblical hermeneutics is a more specific field—the study of the meaning of the language of the Bible. Its task is to determine what a biblical statement meant to its author and his readers, and then to explain and apply this meaning for us today. Don’t miss the order of priority: first what the Bible meant, and then what it means today. The simple fact is *the text can never mean what it never meant*.

Remembering that one fact would prevent most of the mistakes people make in understanding the Bible today. Biblical interpretation is both a science and an art. It is a **science** because it is guided by principles within a system. There are guidelines, which will help you to understand and apply every part of the Bible. But biblical interpretation is also an **art** because you must apply these principles by skill.

There two categories of guidelines for Bible study: “**general**” and “**special**.” “**General**” principles apply to the study of every passage in the Bible. You should always know what you can about the author of the book you’re studying, his times, his readers, and his purpose. This is true of every passage in Scripture. “**Special**” principles apply only to certain parts of the Bible. For instance, there are guidelines for interpreting the poetry of the Psalms that you wouldn’t want to use in studying the historical narrative of Acts.

To sum up: biblical interpretation is our effort to understand what the Bible meant when it was written, and then to understand and live out it’s meaning today. This task is done through the skillful application of principles which apply to the entire Bible as well as guidelines that are intended only for certain parts of Scripture.

WHY DOES THE BIBLE NEED INTERPRETING?

Communication and interpretation are important subjects in our society. The biggest problem in most troubled homes is communication—learning how to share and understand each other’s needs. Likewise, lawyers interpret the law for their clients; judges interpret the law for the lawyers; and police interpret the law for our citizens. Counselors help families interpret their problems.

But when we turn to the Bible, interpretation seems less necessary. Why can’t we just read it? Why must it be interpreted? There are five answers to this question.

THE LORD CALLS US TO BIBLE STUDY

First, the Lord wants us to interpret His word and to do this well. Paul’s command to Timothy is still God’s word for us today: “***Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth***” (2 Tim 2:15) (NIV). Paul’s phrase “***correctly handles***” refers to a stonemason who cuts stones precisely so they will fit into their places in a building. We are called to interpret correctly the “***word of truth***” or “to dissect (expound) correctly (the divine message, Strong’s definition).

BIBLICAL CHARACTERS INTERPRET THE BIBLE

From the time God first began to give us His word, His people have interpreted and applied it to their lives. For instance, the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20 are followed by thirty-seven chapters that interpret and apply them (Exodus 21-30 and Leviticus). The Book of Deuteronomy is Moses' interpretation (by inspiration) and application of God's word for the Hebrews before they entered the Promised Land.

The prophets interpreted (by inspiration) God's Law for the people and challenged them to obey it. Ezra's ministry focused on interpretation also: ***"They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read"*** (Neh 8:8). Those in the New Testament continued this practice. As Jesus taught, He interpreted the Old Testament and applied its message to Himself. When He met with two disciples following His resurrection, here was His approach:

"And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself." Luke 24:27
(RSV)

The Gospels each interpret Jesus' ministry. Acts describes the work of the early church to interpret the gospel for the world. The epistles interpret this gospel for the church. Revelation interprets and applies the hope of the Christian faith for all believers. The Bible not only reveals to us God's word—many of its pages are given to interpreting and applying that word as well. Bible study is itself "biblical."

THE BIBLE IS GOD'S AUTHORITATIVE WORD

Another reason the Bible must be interpreted and understood is because of its importance in our lives. It shows us that we need Him and that He will meet us in His word. It is His authority for our lives today. People have spoken of the Bible as the ***"sola fidei regula,"*** our only rule of faith, therefore, we must understand and apply its message faithfully to our lives.

The Bible is God's word of authority on every moral and spiritual topic. The way we interpret it will govern how we understand salvation, the Christian life, and every other spiritual and moral issue. We must interpret it properly so that we can know God's word on these subjects.

THE BIBLE IS AN ANCIENT BOOK

One fact about the Bible that we often overlook is that it is a very old book. Its authors finished writing during the days of the Roman Empire toward the close of the first century. Moses began writing the first five books of the Old Testament 1,500 years before Christ. Therefore, people have been reading God's word for 3,500 years.

We must understand what the Bible meant when it was first written so we can know what it means today. There are four "gaps" between biblical times and ours.

THE TIME GAP:

We are separated from biblical events by thousands of years. It makes sense that the more we close this gap in time, the better we can understand the Bible.

For instance, we can understand Jonah's refusal to go to Nineveh and preach against their sins when we know about those sins. The Ninevites were a warrior nation; so cruel that they often peeled the skin from those they conquered and used it as wallpaper in their homes. Understanding the times helps us identify with Jonah's struggle to be faithful. Along with this was the attitude of the Jew toward other nations and the fact that God had compassion on other nations as well as the Jews. Crossing the time gap brings home the biblical message.

THE CULTURE GAP:

We also need to understand the differences between the culture of the biblical times and ours. Consider Jesus' statement, ***"If someone forces you to go one mile, go with two miles"*** (Matt 5:41). He was referring to the law that permitted Roman soldiers to force their subjects to carry their military pack for one mile. This was an act of slavery and terrible humiliation. Jesus calls us to respond to humiliation with willing service.

Another example is Jesus' warning, ***"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal"*** (Matt 6:19). In Jesus' day a man often buried his money beneath a wall of his house.

These walls were thin and brittle, and thieves could simply put their fist through and steal what was buried beneath. Jesus is saying that earthly possessions can be stolen, no matter where we hide them, so we should make sure that we invest and trust in heaven instead. Once we cross the culture gap, we understand the relevance and power of God's word.

THE LANGUAGE GAP:

Differences in the meaning of words and expressions often confuse us as we study. Consider this perplexing statement by Jesus: ***"Anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell"*** (Matt 5:22).

"Raca" was an Aramaic term of contempt meaning, "O empty one, i.e. thou worthless one as a term of utter vilification" according to Strong's Definition. It was something similar to an obscenity today. "Fool" was even worse, however, for the word accused a person of immorality in character. What Jesus is saying is that using an obscenity is wrong and punishable, but slandering someone's character is even worse. When we cross the language gap we understand that obscenity and slander are both wrong today.

THE PERSPECTIVE GAP:

People in biblical times had ways of understanding their world which are sometimes much different from ours. For instance, they could speak of the ***"four quarters of the earth"*** NIV or ***"four corners of the earth"*** KJV (Isa 11:12). They thought of heaven as "up" (Job

22:12; Rev 4:1) and hell as “down” (Prov 15:24; Job 11:8). They were writing to people of that day. This does not make them any less intelligent than us. Our own understanding of the universe continues to change and contradict our earlier beliefs. A science textbook is ten years behind the times the moment it rolls off the presses. Nonetheless, we must watch for places in Scripture where the author and his first readers viewed the world in ways that must be interpreted for people today.

The Bible does not need to be *made* relevant. Human nature does not change, so the biblical answers to our problems do not change either. But we must clear the way for the message of the Bible to be understood today. We must help people to cross the “gaps” between themselves and God’s word. When we build these bridges the biblical message will come across in its ever-relevant power (Rom 1:16; Acts 20:32).

YOU MUST UNDERSTAND THE AUTHOR’S INTENDED MEANING

God has one primary purpose for His word: to bring us into a personal relationship with Himself in order that He might *“bring many sons into glory”* (Heb 2:10). This purpose must always be kept in mind as you study the Scriptures. Along with this general purpose, however, there is also a specific purpose for each individual passage. You must know what the author intended to say if his work is to make sense today. Here we find one of the most important principles for all Bible study: *you must know what the author meant before you can know what his words mean now.*

As we wrote before, the Bible can never mean what it never meant. You must apply the Scriptures in keeping with their intended meaning and purpose. This raises a very difficult problem for modern readers: how can you know the author’s intent? How do you decide what Matthew wanted to accomplish with his Gospel, or the reasons why Moses gave us Leviticus? There’s only one answer to this problem: interpretation. Principles of Bible study can help you understand the purpose behind each part of the Bible. Then you can apply the passage in the way its author intended. This makes for life-changing study of God’s word.

WHY MUST YOU INTERPRET THE BIBLE?

If we believe in the task and necessity of biblical interpretation, one more question naturally arises: *“Why must one learn to do this?”* Isn’t this what you expect your preacher to do? When you’re sick you consult a doctor. When you travel by air you trust a pilot. Why then do you need to learn how to interpret the Bible for yourself? Can’t you simply rely on your preacher and other students of the Bible to do this for you? I believe one writer stated it exceptionally well:

“Preachers spend too much time studying the Bible for their people.... Frankly, one of my greatest personal regrets in twenty-five years of preaching is that I don’t feel I taught my people how to study the Bible for themselves, either as individuals or in a group. I think I’ve been a fairly good preacher. People took notes and were very affirming about what I preached. So I think my preaching was definitely meeting a need. But now as I look back, I feel I was studying the Bible for the people. We are moving toward a point where there are just a few strong communicators who are studying the Bible for us all. What I should have done was help them to understand how I studied it and how they could learn to study it for themselves.”

This writer is right, for following three reasons:

GOD WANTS TO MEET *YOU* PERSONALLY IN HIS WORD:

God intends the Bible to draw you into personal fellowship with Him. He cannot do this when you study His word only through the mind and personality of another person. The Bible becomes a second-hand book for you. You are drawn more to the preacher or teacher than to the person of Christ, and this is not the intention of the Scriptures. Jesus cannot be experienced second-hand. Salvation is intensely personal in nature. The Holy Spirit dwells in your heart. Spiritual growth is a matter of personal, individual experience.

Nothing God intends the Bible to accomplish in your life can be done effectively second-hand. Now, this doesn't mean that you don't need the assistance of other Christians. Those who have devoted their lives to the study of the Bible have much help to offer you. The Christian life was always meant to be lived in community with other believers. This is true of Bible study as well. The point is you must not depend on others. You must interpret God's word for yourself if the purpose of bible study is to be fulfilled in your life.

YOU HAVE THE RIGHT TO STUDY FOR *YOURSELF*:

Each Christian is his or her own priest before God. We call this doctrine "*the priesthood of the believer.*" This means that you need no intermediary between yourself and your Father in heaven. You can pray directly to God, confess your sins and ask His forgiveness, and live in personal fellowship with Him.

One very important result of this doctrine is that every believer has the right and responsibility to interpret the Bible personally. As you need no intermediary between you and God, so you need none between you and His word. The same Holy Spirit who brought salvation to you can and will help you to understand the word of God. Since you are your own priest before God, you can learn His word for yourself.

YOU SHOULD NOT DEPEND ON THE OPINIONS OF OTHERS:

If you don't study for yourself, your ideas will be those of others. And the opinions of others are not always right. If you let others do all your Bible study for you, you will only know God as they do. Their opinions and biases, however good or bad, will become yours. It is impossible to interpret the Bible with absolute objectivity. No one can interpret the Bible apart from his or her own presuppositions. Our opinions will always affect our study of the Bible.

Religious heritage affects Bible study, for the doctrines taught by the church of which we are a member or where we have attended for a long period of time usually become our own without study. Take Jesus' word to Peter, "*You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church*" (Matt 16:18). Catholic interpreters will see in this text the establishment of the papacy; others will not. Each brings his or her own religious heritage and viewpoint to the text.

The real need for every person is to get behind the sermons, classes, and creed books in order to study and interpret the Bible itself. God wants to meet you personally in His word, but for this to occur you must interpret it yourself. You are your own priest before the Father, but you must interpret the Bible for yourself to exercise this privilege and responsibility. You need to learn and apply principles that make the Bible God's word to *you*.

Questions

1. The _____ calls us to Bible study.
2. _____ interpret the Bible.
3. The Bible is God's _____ word.
4. The Bible is an _____ book.
5. You must understand the author's _____ meaning.
6. God wants to meet you _____ in His word.
7. You have the right to study _____.
8. You should not depend on the _____ of others.
9. Match the category on the left with its best example on the right:

_____ Time gap

a. "If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two."

_____ Culture gap

b. The "four quarters of the earth."

_____ Language gap

c. Jonah's refusal to confront the sin of the wicked Ninevites.

_____ Perspective gap

d. "Raca"