

# HOW TO READ & INTERPRET THE BIBLE

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## INTRODUCTION

As followers of Jesus, it is important that we learn at least the basic principles of how to properly interpret the Bible. Interpreting the Bible (the subject called Hermeneutics) is the science and art of understanding, translating, and explaining the meaning of the Scripture text. There are some basic principles that you need to apply when interpreting the Bible. These principles will help you to discover and discern the intended meaning of a Bible passage rather than imposing your own ideas on the text.

When it comes to making claims about what the Bible means, we often hear comments from Christians or non-Christians like the following:

- "Well, that's just your interpretation."
- "The Bible can be made to say anything you want."
- "This is what the Bible means to me."

All of these types of comments relate to principles of biblical interpretation. Though there were more than 40 "writers," there is but one "Author," God. His message is His message and we should not impose our own ideas on the text and thereby distort the truth of God's Word. That is why we follow certain guidelines and principles.

## 2 Timothy 2:15 (NIV)

"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."

## THE UNIQUENESS OF THE BIBLE

The Bible is a fascinating book, written over 1600 years by about 40 authors. The challenge for us is how to properly understand what the various authors intended to say. We need to remember that they were from different backgrounds and lived in different times and geographical locations. Also, there are thousands of years between them and us, making it even a greater challenge to properly understand their true message and its meaning. They spoke different languages, like Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek and they held different positions in life, from kings to prophets, from fishermen to liberators and doctors.

One very important thing to remember is that about 64 of 66 books of the Bible were written by Jewish authors. Also, even though the New Testament was written in Greek, the authors were predominantly Jewish and therefore it has an underlining Jewish characteristic and flavour to it. To have a basic understanding of Jewish culture and worldview will benefit you a lot in your quest to understand the Bible better.

## WHY SO MANY DIFFERENT IDEAS ABOUT TRUTH

One of the major reasons why people have different ideas concerning what the Bible says is that they use different rules or standards for interpreting it. It was never God's intention that people read the same document and come away with different ideas about what it is saying.

## 1 Corinthians 1:10

I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought.

## **SOME IMPORTANT PRINCIPLES OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION**

### **Principle 1 – Context**

Interpretations of the Bible must be done in the context of the passage because context determines meaning! Far too often people try to interpret a verse by itself in isolation without looking at the context itself. For example, consider the verse Revelation 3:20 which is sometimes used as an illustration for evangelism. Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me (Rev 3:20; NASB). If this is all you looked at, it would be easy to understand the verse in terms of someone asking Jesus into his or her life for the first time. But the context in the preceding verse (v. 19) is talking about the discipline of those whom Jesus loves, which would most naturally refer to believers. Also, in looking at the larger paragraph the passage is to a church (Rev 3:14, 22). The verse is really addressed to believers who need to repent of their sin and return to fellowship with God. To understand the context is vitally important.

### **Principle 2: The author's intention**

Interpretation must be based on the author's intention of meaning and not the reader. This means we must get into the author's life and take the following into account:

- **Context.** In context lies truth!
  
- **History**
  
- **Geography**
  
- **Grammar**  
Language and the meaning of words change over time. The words in the Word must be carefully studied to determine if they have a unique biblical meaning.
  
- **Cultural situation**  
The Bible was written within the culture and thought forms of the Middle East. Its language sparkles with references to the everyday life and customs of the times in which it was written. While these references were well known to those who lived in Bible times, we must become familiar with their manner of life, idioms, customs and culture in order to arrive at the proper understanding of Scripture as it would have been understood in Bible times.
  
- **Traditions** of the time
  
- **Religions** of the time

### **Principle 3 - Consider the type of literature you are reading**

Be sensitive to the type of literature you are in. The Bible contains many different types of literature, for example: Torah (instructions/law), narrative, wisdom literature, poetry, gospel, parables, epistles, and end time literature (apocalyptic). Each of these types of literature has specific features that must be considered when interpreting a text. Where we are in the Bible makes a big difference on how we interpret and apply it.

**Principle 4: Use the Bible to help interpret itself.**

Interpret difficult passages with clear ones. This is sometimes called the law of non-contradiction.

**Principle 5: Literal interpretation first**

Interpret the Bible literally (or normally) allowing for normal use of figurative language. Take the plain meaning of the text at face value. When the literal does not make sense you probably have a figure of speech. For example, Isaiah 55:12 states the trees of the field will clap their hands. Since trees do not have hands or clap this must be a figure of speech. Look for words such as “like” or “as” which can also communicate a figure of speech. Figures of speech and illustrations give the Bible a powerful and colourful means of expression. They are an important part of the normal expression of language.

**Principle 6: Interpretation must be distinguished from application.**

While there is one interpretation that is historical, there are many applications that can be carried over to our modern context. We need to build an application bridge from the interpretation to the timeless principle and then to the application now. For example, in John 12, Mary anoints Jesus with very expensive oil. The historical context records a historical event. The interpretation relates only to what Mary did to Jesus. What about us today? An application might be that we are willing to give sacrificially for the Lord's work and give Jesus acts of worship as Mary did.

**Principle 7: The Bible was written for believers, not for sceptics.**

The Bible was not written for unbelievers, but for those willing to search diligently for the truth. Some of the language of Scripture is written with the specific intent of confounding those who either do not have ears willing to hear or who are unwilling to be diligent in their study (Prov. 2:1-5; 25:2; Matt. 13:10-13). To arrive at the truth, one must have faith in God and trust in the integrity of His Word.

The Bible is an accurate and inspired record of many events that were not necessarily inspired by God, and thus Scripture quotes the words of many men and women who were not speaking for God. The reader must carefully note who is speaking and/or acting. Unless God or Jesus Christ is speaking, or a passage is in narrative form, what is said or done by others may not be directly inspired by God. For example, the Pharisees said Jesus drove out demons by the power of Beelzebub, but of course, that is not true. What they said was not true, but that they said it is true. What is inspired is the biblical witness itself, not necessarily every word and event that it bears witness of.

**SOME EXAMPLES OF TAKING VERSES OUT OF CONTEXT****1. Philippians 4:13, (NKJV)**

I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

This verse is all about being content, and preserving through times of need, rather than simply being granted the strength to do anything. Looking back a few verses, we can see that Paul is actually saying “I can be content through Him who gives me strength.” In the previous verse, Philippians 4:12, Paul says that “I know what it is to be in need...I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation,

whether well fed or hungry...” Paul makes no boast, to the church at Philippi, that he can achieve or endure anything through God who strengthens him. He tells them, instead, that God grants him the strength to be content, no matter the circumstance.

## 2. **Jeremiah 29:11**

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you, and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”

This verse is typically given to someone as a sentiment during a difficult time. First, we need to know who is being spoken to. Jeremiah is writing to the Israelites, promising a specific end to their Babylonian exile. He says that “When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place,” in Jeremiah 29:10, just one verse prior. His aforementioned plans are, specifically, for the exiled Israelites. He cares for us, and has the big picture in mind. No matter the situation, He can bring us back to His presence and purpose. This verse is an example of God’s character rather than a general promise to all Christians.

## 3. **Matthew 18:20, (KJV)**

For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them

This verse does not speak about the fact that God is with you even though the prayer group, Bible study, or church is small. It is not an excuse to miss services because you gathered with 2 other believers and therefore Jesus is in your midst. This verse falls specifically within the context of church discipline and dealing with wayward believers. It is meant to be an encouragement to church leaders during tough times of loving confrontation to say that God would be present with the two to three witnesses as they are intentional in correcting and restoring a fallen brother or sister.

## 4. **Matthew 7:1, (KJV)**

Judge not, that ye be not judged.

We’re living in a day that values “tolerance” above all, unless, of course, someone disagrees with our beliefs, lifestyles, or opinions; then, we’re extremely intolerant. We may even boldly shout, “Only God can judge me!” However, this view is not Biblically correct.

This verse is not a warning against speaking out against certain actions or behaviors that are wrong. In fact, in other places of Scripture, we’re told “we’ll know them by their fruit.” We’re also commanded in the Great Commission to “make disciples,” which includes helping others wage war against sin. However, Matthew 7 is a warning against self-righteousness and hypocrisy. If we’re going to correct someone, then we must expect to be held to the same standard. If we judge with aggression, then we can expect to be judged with aggression. When you have removed the plank (sin) from your own eye, then we must remove the speck in our brother’s.