

# HOW TO STUDY A TOPIC IN THE BIBLE!

## PRINCIPLES OF INTERPRETATION

Interpretation may be defined as: "the process of determining the meaning of a text." What is the goal of interpretation? It is to understand what the passage means. (*Josh McDowell's Guide to Understanding Your Bible*, p 69.)

The apostle Peter was clear when he stated these words,

Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.  
2 Pet 1:20-21

"To interpret means to explain or tell the meaning of something. When interpreting a Scripture passage, your aim should be to determine what the author meant [for the original audience to understand] by the words which he used." (Wald, *The Joy of Discovery in Bible Study*, revised edition, p. 41)

Some basic guidelines for interpretation were given in Track One: Doctrine & Theology; Session 2, "The Doctrine of the Bible", p. 4. In summary, Scripture should be interpreted normally, grammatically, contextually and historically. These comments will suffice to introduce us to . . .

### The 3 Keys to Unlock Interpretation

I. *The Bible is Literature.*

**A. The same principles that apply to the understanding of any other literature apply also to the Word of God.**

**B. The basic difference between other literature and the Bible is validity.**

1. All Scripture is true.

a. You do not have to determine what portions of Scripture are truth.

b. This makes interpretation rich because it is inerrant, inspired, powerful and authoritative.

2. Not all literature is true.

**C. The "Relationship Questions" chart which lists specific things to observe is a tool that will enable you to analyze the literary form of a text.** In the Bible you will find a variety of literary forms, such as . . .

1. Figures of speech

2. Prose

3. Poetry

4. Drama
5. Narrative

II. *The Bible is Historical.* It records actual events that took place in time and space.

**A. Geographical locations will aid in your understanding of a passage, consult a good map!**

**B. Political developments influenced the lives of the author, the recipients and their circumstances; read articles in Bible Dictionaries or Encyclopedias to learn of this important background information.**

**C. Cultural clues may provide insight into the the meaning of an otherwise obscure text.** The cultures of many different countries and people are described in the Bible.

Note: You will spend a life-time learning the historical background of the Bible. There is not one book that will provide all the answers to your questions. This is where the real work of being a student comes into play. As a student of the Bible you will learn where to start to look for answers to your questions. This takes diligence and time, be diligent with the time you have, don't worry about the time you don't have!

I recommend that you purchase *The New Bible Dictionary*, Edited by J. D. Douglas. This is an excellent work with signed articles and bibliographies. More than likely it will address any biblical person, place, thing, subject or topic that you want to read about. This is the best one volume resource, second only to a good study Bible, you could purchase.

III. *The Bible is Grammatical!*

**A. Don't let this scare you, this just another way of stating that there are logical rules that governed the writing of words, phrases, clauses, sentences and paragraphs.** (This should be comforting to all the engineer types who need a logical explanation for every thing!)

**B. Some elements of grammar include:**

1. Parts of speech (noun, verb, conjunctions)
2. Questions
3. Commands
4. Syntax (style and usage of various parts of speech including tense, mood, voice, kind of action; gender, number, case; most of which you will seldom use.

How do you spell relief?

Without these "3 Keys" you will not be an able interpreter of the Word of God. These are the guidelines that will lead you toward not only an accurate knowledge of God's Word, but also an enriching and fulfilling process of understanding the Scriptures. Interpretation is a process. This process includes the use of specific Bible study skill, such as paraphrasing, structural diagramming, cross-referencing, word studies and outlining. In subsequent sessions we will learn and practice these skills.

Assignment: Review the notes until you are comfortable discussing the concepts mentioned. Become familiar with the maps in the back of your study Bible or atlas, a Bible dictionary or encyclopedia, and a time line of ancient history and the life of Christ (also included in many study Bibles and, or Bible dictionaries). Use a dictionary to look-up "part of speech". Write down the definition. Look-up the definitions for the major parts of speech and write down their definitions. Include this as a vital part of your notes, you will use this frequently!

## **A BRIEF GUIDE TO THE PROCESS OF INTERPRETATION**

### ***I. Step One, Overview of the Paragraph/Teaching Block***

A. **Read the larger context** (section, small book) so that you are able to follow the progression of thought and understand it's relationship/contribution to the message of the book.

B. **Read the paragraph repeatedly** so that you are able to follow the progression of thought and understand it's relationship/contribution to the section.

C. **Write a paraphrase** of the paragraph.

D. **Produce a structural layout** of the paragraph so that you can state the theme (complete subject and complement) of the paragraph concisely and trace the development of that theme clearly.

E. **Begin a "Things to Mention List"**.

### ***II. Step Two, Analysis of the Paragraph/Teaching Block***

A. **Compare translations** and make note of significant differences in the vocabulary, phraseology or meaning of the paragraph. Be sure to observe the textual footnotes in the more recent translations.

B. **Identify and classify the various parts of speech**, especially the verbs!

C. **List the key words** (essential to your understanding or the argument of the paragraph).

D. **Study these words** and determine their meaning in this context.

E. **Investigate the historical/cultural setting** of the paragraph.

### **III. Step Three, Examination of Contextual Issues**

A. **Define the historical context** (recipients, setting and occasion).

B. **Define the literary context** (the proposition and the position of the paragraph in the argument of the section/book).

### **IV. Step Four, Evaluation of Secondary Sources**

A. **Consult the commentaries**, compare your conclusions with theirs.

B. **Read other literature**; dictionaries, encyclopedias, etc.

### *V. Step Five, Analysis of the Biblical-Theological Context*

A. **Study the relation to Scripture through the use of cross-reference studies.**

B. **Study the relation/contribution to theology.**