

Elements of Productive Bible Study: Interpret, Part 1

Scripture: 2 Timothy 2:15

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When it comes to Bible study, too often people want to jump straight to application. They might be faithful to read God's Word, but they skip an important step on the way to applying it to their lives. And in many cases, that application comes from only the most basic, shallow knowledge of what Scripture truly says and means.

You can't dig deeply into the riches of God's truth if you only have a surface understanding of its meaning. If you truly want to apply God's Word to your life, you cannot skip over the important step of *interpretation*. It's not enough to simply know what the Bible says—we must strive to know what it *means* by what it says.

It's a matter of, as Paul charged Timothy, "rightly dividing the Word" (2 Timothy 2:15, NKJV). Left to our own understanding, we might be able to make some limited sense of portions of Scripture. However, other passages would leave us as clueless and confused as the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:31). In fact, without careful interpretation, you could wind up with a different application of biblical truth for each person in your family, your Bible study group, or even your congregation.

In order to interpret the true meaning of Scripture, there are a number of gaps we need to bridge. Since the Bible was originally written in Hebrew, Greek, and even some Aramaic, there are **language** gaps we need to cross. Why did the biblical authors use the words, phrases, and idioms they used, and what did they mean to the original audience? And do our translations of those words and phrases capture their full meaning, or is there more to it than is instantly apparent in our English Bibles?

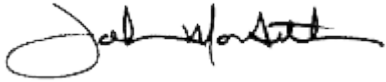
Along those same lines, we need to bridge the **culture** gap. We need to understand how the biblical authors thought and lived, and how that influenced what they wrote. You can't appreciate the full weight of the parable of the Good Samaritan or Christ's interaction with the woman at the well if you don't understand the tension between Jews and Samaritans. We don't need to contextualize Scripture to make it relevant today—we need to understand its original context and how it shaped God's Word.

In addition to language and culture, there's also a **geography** gap. Even a basic understanding of Old and New Testament geography can make a significant difference in your understanding of a particular text. How many times have you consulted the maps in the back of your Bible? Just that basic information helps bring vivid detail to the life and ministry of Christ, His disciples, and many other Old and New Testament figures.

Finally, when it comes to interpreting God's Word, we need to bridge the **history** gap. Knowing Pilate's background and the mistakes he'd made with the Jews helps you understand why he was so willing to hand Jesus over for crucifixion. Knowing about the wicked lives of the Roman rulers helps you understand the kind of persecution and opposition Paul and the other apostles faced. Don't fall

into the trap of treating God's Word like a collection of fables, fairy tales, and ancient proverbs. Knowing the real history that shaped the events in Scripture helps bring them to life in your study.

The work of bridging those gaps is interpretation, and it's a vital part of any thorough, productive Bible study. It can seem like daunting work at first, but it's the only way to get past a shallow, surface understanding of God's truth. To help you with that, tomorrow we're going to look at five key principles of Bible interpretation.

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to be "John MacArthur". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and a long, sweeping underline.

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