

Elements of Productive Bible Study: Interpret, Part 2

Scripture: 2 Timothy 2:15; 2 Timothy 3:16

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Faithfully reading Scripture is fundamental to your spiritual growth. But reading alone isn't enough to sanctify you—it's just the first step in the process.

To truly get the full meaning—and the full benefit—of Scripture, you've got to be able to *interpret* it accurately. While you might be able to glean some eternal truth from a basic, surface reading of the text, God's Word deserves and demands our careful attention and diligent study.

We already looked last week at some of the common, dangerous mistakes people make when it comes to interpreting the Bible. Today, I want to highlight five key principles of sound biblical interpretation. These are tools I use regularly when I'm preparing to teach, and I know they will help you in your own study.

The Literal Principle

In simple terms, this means you take the words of Scripture in their literal, normal, natural sense. A literal view of God's Word will help guard you against spurious interpretive methods like numerology, extreme allegory, and bizarre mysticism. What each word means is what it means.

Obviously, that's not a call for slavish, rigid literalism. But even where Scripture employs parables, hyperbole, similes, metaphors, and symbolism, we're to read and understand those figures of speech in their natural, normal sense.

Fans of allegory will point to the figurative language deployed in some apocalyptic prophecies, but that's far from the norm in Scripture. And even in those passages, a clear understanding relies on historical study and not the imagination of the reader.

Don't approach Scripture as if it's a treasure map or a puzzle that needs to be solved to access some secret meaning. If you ignore the literal understanding, you discard any hope for an accurate, coherent interpretation. With few exceptions, the simple, direct meaning of the text *is* its original, intended meaning.

The Historical Principle

We need to work to understand the Bible in its original, historical context. Ask yourself this question: "What did this verse or passage mean to its author and its original audience?" A text without a *context* is a *pretext*.

To fully understand any book of the Bible, you need to be aware of the history involved. Who was the original audience? Where did they live? What were the political and cultural conditions like? What

were the tensions, problems, and crises in that community at the time of the writing, and did the writer address those issues? Were there specific customs or rituals that have a bearing on the meaning of the text?

Answering those questions and others like them helps bridge the gap between the culture of the Bible and our modern society, bringing you to a clear, thorough understanding of the writer's original message.

The Grammatical Principle

Often the syntactical construction of a passage is the key to its meaning. Verbs, nouns, pronouns, prepositions—just as in any other language, the usage and placement of the individual words help determine their meaning.

Sentence diagramming isn't as stressed in grammar classes as it once was, but identifying the grammatical parts of a verse or passage and how they work together is very helpful when studying Scripture. If you don't accurately and precisely follow the sequence of the words and phrases, how can you hope to know what God's Word truly says?

The first thing I do when I prepare to teach a passage is study the biblical text in its original language. I want to make sure to get the full meaning of each word in the passage, and not overlook some nuance that can be lost in the translation to English. You can do the same in your personal study, even if you don't know Greek and Hebrew. Interlinear translations, Bible dictionaries, and good commentaries ought to give you insight into the original languages, and help you break down what the words and phrases meant to their original audience.

The Synthesis Principle

If the Bible is God's Word, it must be consistent with itself. No part of Scripture can contradict any other part. It was all inspired by one Author—the Holy Spirit—and consequently, it reflects a marvelous, supernatural unity.

That means that obscure passages can—and should—be understood in light of clearer ones. The synthesis principle puts Scripture together with Scripture to arrive at a clear, consistent meaning. If you hold to an interpretation of one passage that does not square with something in another passage, one of the passages is being interpreted incorrectly—and possibly both of them.

Using Scripture to interpret itself will also guard you from many heretical, extrabiblical doctrines, as it forces you to submit your interpretation to the standard and context of the rest of Scripture. It protects you from spiritual contradictions.

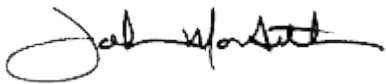
The Practical Principle

You can't end your Bible study without asking, "What does all this have to do with me?" What does the passage have to say about faith, godliness, growth, sin, and repentance, and what are the implications for your life?

Regardless of what you're studying, there will be some practical connection to your life. As Paul said in 2 Timothy 3:16, "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness."

Once you've considered the literal meaning of a passage, its historical and grammatical context, and how it harmonizes with the rest of Scripture, you need to draw out the practical implications for your life. That's what productive Bible study looks like—digging down to the original meaning of a text and applying it to your life.

Does that seem like something you can do faithfully in your own, personal study of God's Word?

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John", with a stylized flourish extending to the right.

(Scheduling note: Be sure to look for a special announcement here on the GTY Blog Monday morning. We'll return to John's series on productive Bible study later in the week.)

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