

**AGAPE HOUSE OF WORSHIP
WEDNESDAY BIBLE STUDY**

**Study Series: Keys to Understanding the Bible (Acts 8:30-31)
Lesson 4 –Principles of Bible Interpretation**

**Wednesday, September 27, 2023
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Interpreting the Bible

For the scripture to benefit us, it must be properly understood and interpreted. The two theological terminologies important in bible interpretation are exegesis and hermeneutics. Biblical exegesis is the actual interpretation of the Bible, the bringing out of its meaning. Hermeneutics, however, is the science and art of understanding, translating, and explaining the meaning of the Scripture text. The word interpret can be used to mean “to understand,” “to translate,” or “to explain.” Today, we will cover nine hermeneutical principles that lead us to the proper exegesis of the scripture.

1. Understand the overarching story of the Bible.

Even though the Bible contains 66 books written by 40 authors, they all tell one beautiful story. Remember, there is one author behind it “*All Scripture is God-breathed*” (2 Timothy 3:16). This is called the biblical “metanarrative” (or overarching story of Scripture). It is divided into four parts: Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Restoration. As you study Scripture, read the text through this gospel lens, and watch for this arc, knowing that the smaller stories are all a part of one larger Story. These four categories will enable you to understand where you are in the Story and, in turn, be better able to study God’s Word correctly and in context.

John 5:39 “You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me.”

2. Identify the kind of literature your text is for insight into its meaning.

Bible scholars call this the *genre* of the text. That means the general form the text takes—narrative, prophecy, poetry, history, gospel, epistle. The various kinds of literature present their message in differing styles and with different structures. Narrative texts do not operate the same way epistles do in getting their message across to the reader. The variety in literary forms can become a complicated study. Bible scholars even go beyond the basic forms and even goes to subforms with subtle differences the ordinary reader might not notice.

Revelation 19:12-13 “His eyes were like a flame of fire, and on His head were many crowns. He had a name written that no one knew except Himself. 13 He was clothed with a robe dipped in blood, and His name is called The Word of God.”

Isaiah 53:2 “For He shall grow up before Him as a tender plant, And as a root out of dry ground. He has no form or comeliness; And when we see Him, There is no beauty that we should desire Him.

3. Read the text for its plain and obvious meaning.

A common and persistent myth about the Bible is that its real meaning is hidden behind the surface message. This is not so. Even though the Bible uses symbolic or figurative language, most of it is clear to the reader. Even when you do not know about the people, places, and events in question, you can grasp the point of the text. The use of figurative language in Scripture only enhances the plain meaning of the text.

“Why do you complain about the splinter in your brother’s eye when you have a plank in your own eye?” Jesus said (Matt. 7:3 NIV).

Even though this is figurative language, we have no trouble understanding what he meant. His use of the metaphors makes it even clearer.

4. Look carefully at the language of the text for what it reveals about its meaning.

Words carry thoughts. The words of the text are all we have of the writer’s thoughts. If he hadn’t written it down, we wouldn’t know what he was thinking. So, we can look closely at his words, examining each one carefully for the part it plays in the message. Also look at how the words and phrases connect with one another and how the sentences are constructed. If you can study the text in the original language, you can gain greater insight into the meaning. You can still use lexicons and word study books to guide you.

1 Corinthians 3:1-3 “And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ. 2 I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able; 3 for you are still carnal. For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and [a]behaving like mere men?”

Ephesians 1:3 “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ”

5. Consider the context of the passage for a better understanding of its meaning.

This is often considered the most important principle for accurate interpretation. Bible scholars use the term *context* to discuss various aspects of the original writing of the text—historical, social, political, religious, literary. The most common one is the literary *context* of the passage. Understanding that the writer follows a logical line of thought in what he writes. What he said in the previous verses or chapters and what he said in the ones that follow will help make the text in question clear. Taking the text out of that context risks misinterpreting it. Often clues in the surrounding verses will open aspects of the meaning in your text you would have otherwise missed.

For example, an isolated reading of **Galatians 6:5** “for each one should carry their own load” can cause you to assume that God is encouraging selfish living, but reading it in context will give a better picture.

5. Try to discern the writer’s intentions when he wrote the text.

This principle of intentionality is also critical in Bible interpretation. When you study the text, it is important to keep in mind the writer’s intended message. Unless you can learn the intended meaning of the text writer, you will not be able to exegete the text. Remember, “The text cannot mean what it never meant.” Discovering the writer’s original meaning is your first task as you prepare to study. The intended meaning of the text writer will also be the intended meaning of the Holy Spirit who inspired him to write. Remember, “All scripture is God-breathed” (2 Tim. 3:16 NIV).

7. Notice the various theological themes in the text.

Though a text has one intended meaning, it can have a number of significant theological themes. It can also have a number of different applications. Examples of such themes are love, grace, redemption, faith etc. When you study a passage, you will list these themes and what the text says about them. Identifying these themes and understanding how they relate to one another in your text is a most helpful key to grasping its meaning. These same theological themes will show up in different combinations in various texts throughout the Bible.

8. Understand the principle of deeper meaning (sensus plenior).

The name “sensus plenior” is Latin and translates into English as “a fuller sense of”. In Bible hermeneutics, “sensus plenior” means an additional, deeper meaning, intended by God but not clearly intended by the human author, which is seen to exist in the words of a biblical text (or group of texts, or even a whole book) when they are studied in the light of further revelation or development in the understanding of revelation. (Genesis 22:17-18, Galatians 3:16), 1 Peter 1:10-12.

9. Always take a God-centered perspective for interpreting your text.

This means looking at the text in terms of what it reveals about God and His dealings with His creation, particularly man. This is theological interpretation. It arises from the assumption that the Bible is really God’s means of making Himself known to us. What it says about Him will always be central to every text. The Bible was not given by God to tell us about ancient religious people and how we should all try to be like them. It was given to tell us about the faithful God whom they either served or denied. Their response is not the central message; God’s will and His involvement with His creation are. Even texts that give instructions as to how we should behave reveal something about God.