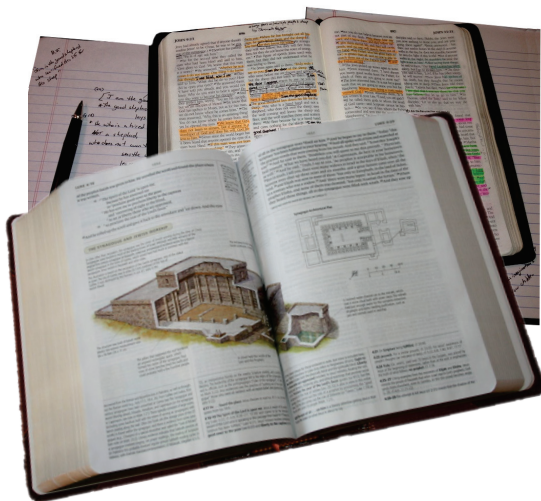


Interpretation in Bible Reading, Part 1

Lesson #3, April 29, 2018



Introduction:

Understanding the Bible is necessary to living it; in fact, we cannot apply a passage to our life until we know what it means.

The Psalmist David indicated thus when he said in Psalms 119:34 *“Give me understanding, and I shall keep thy law; yea, I shall observe it with my whole heart.”* And we better get the meaning of the passage straight if we are to follow through with right behavior. False understanding cannot lead to true living. Bad interpretation will get us into trouble.

Interpretation is the second step in Bible reading. The first step is observation, which asks the question, “What do I see?” Then the step of interpretation asks, “What does it _____?”

Some people are just primarily concerned with what the text meant, e.g. with the history of it, others with what the text means currently. We must be concerned with both. What the Bible means today is the same thing that it meant back when it was written.

“A text cannot mean what it never _____.”

I. WHAT DO WE MEAN BY INTERPRETATION?

In the Interpretation Step we are trying to discover the meaning of the text. But what do we mean by “meaning?”

The meaning is NOT subjective. You don’t determine the meaning, you _____ it.

A. Interpretation is discovery.

God used human agents to write His book. He worked through their personalities, their circumstances, their concerns, and their vocabulary in crafting a manuscript. They were God's co-authors—actually *cooperators*.

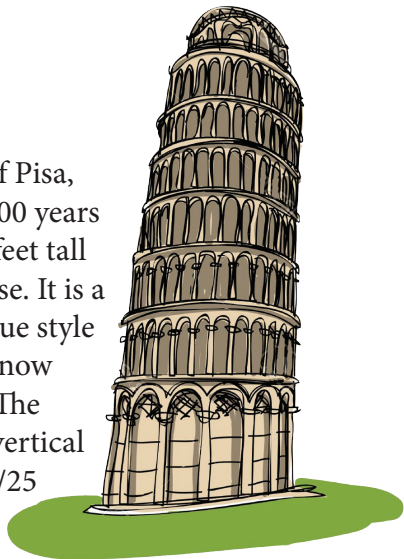
Interpretation is the re-creation step. We're attempting to stand in the author's shoes and re-create his _____—to think as he thought, to feel as he felt, and to decide as he decided. We're asking, "What did this mean to him?" before we ever ask, "What does it mean to us?"

B. Interpretation is secondary.

The Leaning Tower of Pisa

The bell tower of the cathedral of Pisa, Italy was built over a period of 200 years beginning in 1173 AD. It is 180 feet tall and 52 feet in diameter at the base. It is a beautiful structure of Romanesque style architecture. What else do you know about it? Answer—it is leaning. The top of the tower is 16 feet off of vertical center and is tilting at a rate of 1/25 inch each year (every 25 years it is 1 inch more off vertical

center). Why is the Tower of Pisa leaning? Is it because of the color or style of architecture? Perhaps it is the quality of the building materials. No. It is leaning because the _____ is insufficient for the weight of the structure. A bad foundation = a bad structure.



You must lay a good foundation when constructing a building and this is true for Bible study as well. The observation step of Bible study is laying the foundation for interpretation. The greater effort you give in observation, the less effort you will need to give in interpretation and the more accurate your results will be. Conversely, the less effort you give in observation, the more you will give in interpretation, and the greater is your chance of error.

C. Interpretation is necessary.

1. “Don’t need to interpret the Bible—just read the Bible.”
This statement is probably made as a reaction to the attitude or belief that the Bible can’t be understood apart from trained professionals.
2. Every reader is an interpreter; the question is, “Is he or she a good interpreter or a bad one?”
3. Interpretation was necessary in Bible times. Notice Philip and the eunuch (Acts 8:34).
“And the eunuch answered Philip, and said, I pray thee, of whom speaketh the prophet this? of himself, or of some other man?”
4. The aim of good interpretation is to discover the plain meaning of the text. The Bible is a revelation, not a _____.

II. ERRORS TO AVOID IN INTERPRETATION

A. Misreading the text, by...

1. Skipping words (e.g., “. . . money is the root of all evil”)
2. Changing words (e.g., “. . . and the Word was a god”)
3. Deleting words (e.g., “. . . all things work together for good”)

B. Reading the text superficially

1. “Well, to me this verse means . . .”
2. Group Bible studies should not become a pooling of unstudied opinions.
(1 Tim. 5:17) “Let the elders...especially they who labour in the word and doctrine.”
3. Superficial reading is a subjective approach to the Scriptures. The meaning of the Scriptures becomes dependent upon the _____ emotions and thoughts.

C. Spiritualizing the text (not taking the clear, literal sense of Scripture)



1. Relativistic approach. The text meant one thing when it was written and another thing now. The meaning changes with time and culture. This approach is problematic!
 - a. E.g., Paul taught the physical resurrection of Christ in 1 Corinthians 15, but today some claim Jesus' resurrection was a spiritual one, and that it doesn't matter if He walked out of the tomb; what matters is that He lives in our hearts.
 - b. His resurrection had to be physical. If He didn't come out of the tomb, His prophecies failed, which means that He failed and therefore is not God.
2. I call this spiritualizing of Scripture the "Mary's Little Lamb Approach."

D. Distorting the text

1. This is more than just struggling with the difficulties of interpreting the Bible; it is changing the meaning.
2. *(2 Pet 3:16) "As also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things; in which are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest [distort], as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction."* Wrest = distort! They purposefully distort the Bible to achieve some desired end.

Caution for Us All!

Sincere, godly, Bible-believing Christians disagree at times on the meaning of particular passages in the Bible. Differences in interpretation sometimes exist because we see through a glass darkly. The conflict is not in the biblical text but in our limited understanding of the text. God is not confused about what He has said, even though we may be at times. We need to preserve the right to disagree with each other as we assume the responsibility to be as faithful to and accurate with the text as we know how. Let's follow God's admonition to us to:

(2 Timothy 2:15) "Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth."