

Interpreting the Bible

By Jerry A. Collins

- *Can a passage of the Bible have multiple meanings?*
- *How do we know which interpretation is correct?*
- *Why is it important to interpret the Bible correctly?*

There is a basic three-step approach to studying the Bible:

- (1) **Observation** focuses on the question, What does it say? Assuming the role of investigator, no clue or detail is trivial while observing the text.
- (2) **Interpretation** deals with the question, What does it mean? Our quest is to comprehend the author's meaning.
- (3) **Application** answers the question, What must I do? We determine to understand the Bible so that our lives may be transformed by it.

This brochure will explain the step of **interpretation** in this three-step approach.

There are several reasons why we have difficulty interpreting the Bible. First, we are separated from the events written in the Bible by thousands of years of history. Second, we live in a very different culture. Third, the Bible was written in languages foreign to most of us. The step of interpretation bridges these difficulties and aids us in understanding the meaning of the Bible.

The correct meaning of any text is the author's meaning

Instead of superimposing a meaning upon the biblical text, we determine to discover the author's meaning, which is the only correct meaning. Jesus said, *In My Father's house are many dwelling places* (John 14:2).

The meaning of "My Father's house" does not come from the meaning of the words "My," "Father's," or "house" but rather what Jesus had in mind when He said those words. This same statement of Jesus said by a rich young businessman whose father lives in a mansion in Hollywood, California would have a very different meaning.

We need to rethink the author's thoughts in order to understand what he meant. This is done by leaving behind our prejudices, convictions, and presuppositions. Howard Hendricks says, "We're attempting to stand in the author's shoes and re-create his experience--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?" (Howard Hendricks, *Living by the Book*, Chicago: Moody Press, 1991, page 197).

A passage must be interpreted in its context

The immediate context of a verse is its paragraph. The study of the **words, grammar, and parallel passages** is essential to understanding what the author means. The meaning derived from the paragraph must be consistent with the broader context of the chapter, book, other books by the same author, and the rest of Scripture.

The usage of the same word in other passages is relevant, but we need to be careful to not read into a passage the meaning of a word that has a different meaning elsewhere in the Bible. We must allow the immediate context to have the primary weight. Meaning does not come from the technical sense of the words but from how the author uses the words in their context. For instance, if I ask you to xerox something for me, you may use a different brand copier to make the copy. The fact that you did not use a Xerox copier is irrelevant. The understanding comes from what I meant by the word "xerox."

There are several kinds of context to consider when interpreting a passage:

(1) The literary context considers whether we are interpreting narrative (Acts), poetry (Psalms), prophecy (Revelation), parable (Luke 15), discourse (Romans), or wisdom (Proverbs) literature. A parable should not be treated as narrative, nor should poetry be treated as prophecy, etc.

Figures of speech may be used to convey an idea. *Behind every figure of speech is a plain meaning.*

Hyperbole uses exaggeration or overstatement to make a point—“And there are also many other things which Jesus did which if they were written in detail, I suppose that even the world itself would not contain the books which were written” (John 21:25), meaning there were many things Jesus did which were not recorded.

Euphemism is a less offensive expression to indicate a more offensive one—“Would that those who are troubling [less offensive] you would even mutilate [more offensive] themselves” (Galatians 5:12).

Metaphor is a comparison in which one thing represents another—“You are the light of the world” (Matthew 5:14).

Simile is a comparison using “like” or “as”—“He will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water” (Psalm 1:3).

Phenomenal language is used to describe things as they appear to be rather than in precise scientific terms—“the sun had set” (Mark 1:32).

(2) The cultural context considers the culture in which the author lived in order to understand what he meant. Culture is valuable only if the culture is in the passage. For instance, Jesus’ conversation with the woman at the well is culturally significant because the Bible says “Jews have no dealings with Samaritans” (John 4:9).

(3) The geographical context considers the features of the land of the Bible including terrain, topography, weather, transportation, distances, cities, and agriculture. The land is roughly the size of New Jersey (235 miles long and 70 miles wide) and dramatically descends from 3,963 feet above sea level in the North to 1,286 feet below sea level in the South. In addition, the land has highlands, plains, mountains, coastline, and desert.

These features are relevant to the interpretation of Scripture. For instance, Jesus’ setting for the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37) is the steeply descending, winding, and narrow road from Jerusalem to Jericho. This road made travelers vulnerable to robbers who could easily hide in the rocky places. This vulnerability to robbery for travelers on this road is a valuable geographical context for the meaning of this story.

(4) The theological context considers how a passage fits in the unfolding of Scripture. The Bible was not handed down all at once as a complete book. God progressively revealed more and more of His message over a long period of time.

The New Testament adds much that was not revealed in the Old Testament, and what God said was binding in one era may not be in another. For instance, God no longer requires animal sacrifices or a Levitical priesthood. The disciples, once restricted to evangelism of Jews (Matthew 10:5-7), were later commanded to make disciples of all the world (Matthew 28:18-20, Acts 1:8). These commands were consistent with what God was revealing at that point in time.

There is only one correct meaning, and it is understood in a normal way

Each passage must be taken at face value, considering each word in a normal, ordinary, and plain usage. A passage of Scripture does not change meaning over time. Its meaning is always the same because the author’s meaning is always the same, and that meaning is always understood in a normal way. For instance, Paul testifies of the effects of the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ upon the disciples and himself in 1 Corinthians 15. The behavior and teaching of the disciples after Christ’s ascension indicate that they believed in a bodily resurrection (Acts 2). This would be the normal, ordinary, and plain meaning of the passage in its context. To say that this refers only to a spiritual resurrection and all that matters is that the spirit of Jesus lives in you, whether or not He was resurrected, is to give a meaning to the passage that the author never meant.

There are many possible practical applications of an interpretation but only one right interpretation of a passage. So if you and I disagree about the meaning of a passage, then either (a) I am wrong in my understanding of the author’s meaning, (b)

you are wrong in your understanding of the author's meaning, or (c) we are both wrong and need to study the passage further. We cannot disagree and both be correct, since there is only one correct meaning, and that is the author's meaning.

Consult resources which can aid you with interpretation

In addition to a good **study Bible**, use an **exhaustive concordance** for word studies, a **Bible dictionary** for historical information and background of words, a **Bible handbook** for all kinds of background material, **atlases** for the geography of the Bible and commentaries for individual books of the Bible. These resources should never become a substitute for personal Bible study but an aid in your study.

Questions and Answers

Q: *Can a passage of the Bible have multiple meanings?*

A: No. The only meaning is the author's meaning. The meaning of the author does not change. There may be multiple applications of an interpretation but only one correct interpretation of a passage.

Q: *How do we know which interpretation is correct?*

A: The correct interpretation is the author's meaning verified by the context of the passage. The immediate context of the paragraph, the broader context of Scripture, word usage, grammar, and historical background must be studied.

Q: *Why is it important to interpret the Bible correctly?*

A: Our interpretation determines application. Faulty interpretation will lead to incorrect application.