

UNDERSTANDING WHAT GOD SAID

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Discipline is Needed to Understand What God Has Said

The Bible is completely alien to contemporary readers. How can readers today properly understand the 66 books of the Bible which were written in the ancient foreign languages of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek—whose accounts took place in foreign lands, among foreign people, with a foreign culture, from 2000 to 3500 years ago? Just the fact that God is perfect, infinite, and eternal, makes His thoughts and ways beyond our limited thoughts and ways (Isa 55:8–9 cf. Eph 3:14–21). Yet the Bible is the priority in our spiritual growth, the Holy Spirit’s tool, our food, and our means of sanctification (2 Tim 3:16-17; Mt 4:4; Jn 17:17-19). Therefore, humility and discipline are essential to understand what God has revealed through the Scriptures in order to become more like Christ, offering true worship and faithful service.

Doctrine of the Perspicuity (Clarity) of Scripture: All believers Can Understand God’s Word

All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all; yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded, and opened to some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them. —Westminster Confession of Faith 1.7

The Ordinary Means — These are all the means available, to a believer, to understand what God said in His Scriptures. They include the illumination of the Holy Spirit, hermeneutics, pastors and teachers in the local church gifted by God to proclaim and explain the Scriptures, the written works of other past and present-day gifted teachers, plus the individual responsibility of daily Bible study, prayer, and humility.

Definitions That Matter

Meaning — What the divinely inspired human author intended to communicate to the historical audience.

Interpretation — An understanding of the author’s intended historical-grammatical meaning.

The Flow of Welcoming the Scriptures: From Hermeneutics to Exegesis to Exposition

1. **Hermeneutics** — The principles of passage interpretation. It provides the rules that govern a proper interpretation. It is like a recipe that governs how a cake should be made.
2. **Exegesis** — The implementation of valid interpretive principles (*hermeneutics*) to draw out the meaning of the text. This is where all the personal and private technical work is done in researching the text to properly interpret its meaning. This is like the private preparation and baking of a cake. It requires a lot of technical work. It is messy, accumulating an exhaustive number of notes, facts, and data, and requires tools. But the more we do it, the better we get at it. *Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth*—2 Timothy 2:15.
3. **Exposition** — The public communication of the *meaning* of the text, along with its relevance and application, to present-day hearers. This occurs through preaching, teaching, and evangelism. The presenter, or *expositor*, must concisely summarize the results of the *exegetical* work in a Christ-centered way (Lk 24:27). Likewise, not all the details found during *exegesis* should be shared publicly as it would cause an overload of information, producing confusion and diminishing the main thrust of the passage itself. Exposition is analogous to the public serving of a cake for the recipients to taste, experience, and consume. (Exposition is covered in the book but is not covered here)

Hermeneutics: 7 Basic Principles

1. **Single-meaning Principle** — All texts of Scriptures have one, and only one, valid interpretation of what the author intended to mean to the intended audience. The single-meaning principle is the foundation that allows all human communication to make sense.
 - *Single-Meaning & Eisegesis*: While *exegesis* refers to *interpretation* brought out of the text based on careful, objective analysis, *eisegesis* refers to interpretation pressed into the text based on subjective, nonanalytic, imaginative reading. *Eisegesis* is a mishandling of the text by attempting to make an interpreter’s point at the expense of the passage’s context or meaning of words. *Eisegesis* also relies upon the interpreter’s biased approach of Scripture.
 - *Single-Meaning & Application*: Applying the truths of Scripture to the modern reader should only happen after the proper meaning and implications of the text is found. The contemporary reader should never place themselves in the text since the text was not written to him or her. So, one should never say, “what this passage means to me is...” because meaning is never subjective to the reader.
 - *Single-Meaning & Allegory*: To say that a passage is interpreted allegorically is to say that the original meaning of what the author intended to say is either ignored altogether or deemphasized and replaced with a hidden, more spiritualized meaning. It should be noted that allegorical interpretations occur not by what the text says, but what the interpreter desires for it to say. The allegorical interpretation then uses *eisegesis* to add in yet another, or multiple other, meanings to the same passage. Never spiritualize the passage.

Hermeneutics: 7 Basic Principles (continued)

2. **Literal Principle** — Scripture must be interpreted as using normal, not anomalous, language concerning real history and real people.
 - *Normal Language*: Normal language includes figures of speech consisting of analogies, metaphors, similes, symbolism, hyperboles, euphemisms, anthropomorphisms, personifications, irony, illustrations, etc. Note: Parables are examples of analogies.
 - *Anomalous Language*: Allegory and typology use anomalous (out-of-the ordinary) language. Allegory can be defined as secret, spiritualized, or mystic hidden meanings not contained in normal everyday language. When read into a passage, the plain reading of the text becomes superseded by spiritualized or mystical interpretations of a text. Allegorical interpretations violate the single-meaning principle. Typological interpretations are also anomalous, and interpreters should only use what is explicitly revealed in Scripture (eg. 1 Pet 3:20-21; Gal 10:3-14 cf. Gen 16:1-6) rather than imaginatively inventing prophetic types of people, places, things, or events.
3. **Historical Principle** — To understand authorial intent, we must reconstruct the historical context (culture, geography, politics, religion, city conditions, etc.) of the writing whenever it may impact, or aid, in understanding the meaning. This principle is what makes the Bible feel alive and transports the reader into the historical time and setting of the author and audience.
4. **Grammatical Principle** — The author's language, syntax, words, word order, repetition of words, literary genre, structure, etc. was inspired for a purpose. *For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled*—Matthew 5:18. It is for this reason that many believers work diligently to learn the original languages of the Bible.
5. **Synthesis Principle** — Scripture must always interpret Scripture. A passage must be interpreted from within the context of the larger text. The term “synthesis” refers to the combination of ideas to form a systematic whole. Interpreters should not find the meaning of a verse in the Bible isolated from the immediate context of the passage it resides in, nor should the meaning contradict Scripture anywhere else. Ultimately, all Scripture was written by God; so, it is inerrant in its parts and as a whole (2 Tim 3:16-17; Titus 1:2; Heb 6:17-18).
6. **Practical Principle** — While each meaning of a passage from the author is specific to his historical audience, it can also have a *normative implication*, or truth claim, that applies to everyone across time who is in a similar context as the historical context of the passage. Implication bridges the meaning from its historical context to our modern, western cultural and personal setting. Implication always follows a valid interpretation of the meaning and always precedes application. This order is important because of the functions they serve:
 - *Interpretation answers* “What was the author communicating to the audience in his day?”
 - *Implication answers* “What normative truth claim does the meaning imply to everyone today in a similar circumstance?”
 - *Application answers* “What do I do now that I understand the truth?” (This resides in the *exposition* stage and not in the *exegesis* stage)Example: *Implications* of “The Great Commission” (Mt 28:18-20): 1. Disciples are commanded to make disciples. 2. All disciples desire to obey Jesus. 3. Those who don't make disciples are not obeying Jesus. 4. Making disciples of all nations is a constant ongoing work. 5. Making disciples is the combination of evangelism and teaching. 6. Making disciples happens in an assembly of disciples where there is baptism and teaching obedience to Jesus. 7. Only disciples receive water baptism. 8. Baptism of a disciple entails belief in the Trinity. 9. Jesus's disciples cannot make disciples through their own power. 10. Jesus will be with, and helping, His disciples till the “end of the age”.
7. **Application Principle** — Application may be made only after correct *interpretation* of *meaning* and *implication*, by *exegesis*, is complete. While it's the work of the interpreter, and God, to privately *exegete* Scripture and publically deliver truth, the end-goal is application, and it's accomplished by God alone during the step of *exposition*. The Holy Spirit aids in the work of *exposition* by applying truth straight to the needs of the heart of the individual (Heb 4:11-13). This is why God described His Word as the ultimate source of nourishment for the believer (Mt 4:4; Jn 6:63). It is also why, for each truth, applications can be many. Application of God's Word is a means of grace by which a believer's mind is transformed to see God, himself, and the world in the same way God sees Himself, people, and the world.

Exegesis: Context, Word Studies, Observations, Meaning, & Implication

Historical Context

- Who was the author(s)?
- Who was the intended audience?
- When was the book written?
- Why did the author(s) write the book?
- What was the historical-cultural context of the book and of the passage? Caution: Be sure to verify all background information as true. There exists a lot of false information in this area.
- What is the literary genre of the book?
- How does the book fit into Christ's redemptive plan of the entire Bible?
- How does the passage support the redemptive plan of the book?

Word Studies: Dictionaries, Concordances & Lexicons

- Choose words that are unclear, difficult, crucial to the passage, or are repeated.
- Determine all the possible definitions and concepts concerning the word, then choose the meaning that suits its context.
- Be careful not to commit the following word study fallacies: English-only Fallacy (Consult book for further explanation)
 - Root Fallacy
 - Time-frame Fallacy
 - Overload Fallacy
 - Word-count Fallacy
 - Word-concept Fallacy
 - Selective-evidence Fallacy

Sentence Level Observations

- **Word Placement:** Does the placement emphasize anything, or does it represent a break in the flow of thought?
- **Repetition of Words:** Repeated words are important.
- **Comparisons or Contrasts:** Relationship between ideas, people, or items.
- **Lists:** Areas of more than two items. Is there any order or flow to the listed items?
- **Cause and Effect:** There may be more than one effect from a single cause.
- **Figures of Speech:** Expressions that convey an image.
- **Conjunctions:** Terms that join units: and, but, or, nor, for, yet. What do they connect, and what do they convey?
- **Verbs:** What action is conveyed? Is the action in the past, present, future, or ongoing tense? Is there a command?
- **Pronouns:** Identify the antecedent of each pronoun.

Paragraph Level Observations

- **Dialogue:** Who is speaking and to whom?
- **Question and Answer:** Is the text based in a question and answer format?
- **Subject:** Who is doing the action and what action is being done?
- **Means:** How was something done?
- **Purpose/result Statements:** Beyond just the “means,” these answers “why” it was done.
- **If/Then Statements:** Something is conditional based on something else (“for”, “therefore”, and “since” are also keywords here).
- **Actions/Roles:** of God and of people
- **Emotional Terms:** Such as “pleading” or “angry”, or terms of endearment such as “father” or “son”.
- **Tone of Passage:** happy, sad, encouraging, etc.

Observations of Literary Structure: Between 2 or More Paragraphs

- **Contextual Flow:** The connection to the passages before and after it. Note: Never start or stop reading at chapter breaks. While chapter and verse numbers are beneficial for referencing particular passages, there are many “bad” chapter breaks that are known to chop up the thought flow of the author.
- **Shifts or Pivots:** Is the passage being used to present a dramatic shift or pivot in the story?
- **Interchange:** Does the passage shift back and forth between 2 scenes or characters? Here is an example:

The book of Acts shifts from Peter, throughout the first half, to Paul, in the second half, with interchange in between. This reveals how the gospel was moving first to the Jews and then to the Gentiles.
- **Parallelisms or Chiasms.** These are structural ways of writing that can occur in a single verse or across entire chapters, and it is a way for the author to focus the reader onto the main point being made. Note: While these structures help the interpreter get to the meaning with great precision, be careful not to impose patterns, from our own imaginations—whether chiastic or some other pattern, into the text.
 - **Synonymous Parallelisms:** A poetic literary device which involves the repetition of one idea in successive lines. The first half of a verse will make a statement, and the second half will essentially say the same thing in different words. The statements are “parallel” in that they are juxtaposed, or side by side, and they often share similar syntax. The statements are “synonymous” in that they essentially say the same thing. Here is an example:

*But He was pierced for our transgressions,
He was crushed for our iniquities. — Isaiah 53:5*
 - **Antithetical Parallelisms:** Provides an antithesis, or contrast. A verse containing antithetical parallelism will bring together opposing ideas in marked contrast. Instead of saying the same thing twice, it says one thing and then a different thing. Here is an example:

*The heart of the wise inclines to the right,
but the heart of the fool to the left. — Ecclesiastes 10:2*
 - **Synthetic Parallelisms:** In synthetic parallelism, which is not really parallelism at all, related thoughts are brought together to emphasize similarities, contrasts, or other correlations. Here are some examples:

<u>Correlation of behaviors or traits</u> <i>Haughty eyes and a proud heart, the lamp of the wicked, are sin!</i> — Proverbs 21:4	<u>Comparing: lesser action with greater action</u> <i>The sacrifice of the wicked is detestable – how much more so when brought with evil intent!</i> — Proverbs 21:27	<u>Contrasting: better this than that</u> <i>It is better to heed a wise man’s rebuke than to listen to the song of fools.</i> — Ecclesiastes 7:5
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- **Chiasms:** A literary device in which a sequence of ideas is presented and then repeated in reverse order. The result is a “mirror” effect as the ideas are “reflected” back in a passage. Each idea is connected to its “reflection” by a repeated word, often in a related form. The term *chiasm* comes from the Greek letter *chi*, which looks like our letter X. This was a way of writing understood in ancient literature by Jews and Greeks. The linear logic we are used to in our culture, where points are made in one direction leading to a conclusion of the main point at the end, is not the logic of chiastic passages. The main concluding point of a chiasm is found at the center. Here is an example of a chiasm that has been outlined, where the center is marked with an X, and the meaning of the passage explained.

No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth. —Matthew 6:24

A – No one can serve two masters;

B – For either he will hate the one

X – and love the other,

X’ – or he will be loyal to one

B’ – and despise the other.

A’ – You cannot serve God and wealth.

Most people incorrectly think, based on **A** and **A’**, that this passage primarily concerns choosing which master to serve. The chiasmic structure, however, emphasizes a different *meaning* in **X** and **X’**—that one could discern who his master already was through inspection of the heart...by which master he loves (**X**) and is loyal to (**X’**). The main point is surrounded by the supporting points—discern false religious thinking that says one can also serve an opposing master that he hates (**B**) and despises (**B’**). Because no one can serve the two opposing masters listed (**A** and **A’**). This meaning of one’s heart condition with God to discern false religion fits the broader context of Matthew 6.

Observing Redemptive Issues: Restoring the Lost

- Who or what was lost, hurting, or out of place?
- What did the unredeemed state look like?
- What did the redeemed state look like?
- Who did the redeeming?
- How did redemption take place?

Observing Ethical Issues

- **Ethics:** What standards were revealed that show what ought, or ought not, to be done?
- **Morals:** What was actually done by God or by people?
- What ethical dilemmas are seen in God’s actions?
- What ethical dilemmas are seen in people’s actions?

Historical Meaning and Contemporary Implications

After studying the context and making all the necessary observations and word studies needed to understand the target passage, the final step in *exegesis* is to understand all the truths being presented and discern what the main meaning of the passage is, versus which truths exist to support the main meaning. Recall the definition of *meaning* from page 1 and *implication* from the *practical principal* on page 2.

1. Write out all the historical truth claims (in the past tense) that you see in the passage.
2. Write out all the implied truth claims (in the present tense for people today) under each historical truth claim. Note: This is allowed if Scripture treats the historical truth as *normative*. On the other hand, if the historical situation is specific to certain people only, then the historical truth cannot be transferred (*implied*) to everyone as present-day truth. In that case, no implication should be derived. Here is an example of both steps above using a verse that many believers apply mostly to difficult situations only:

I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. —Philippians 4:13

Historical Truth 1: Verse is about Paul knowing how to serve Christ faithfully in times of being humbled and in times of prosperity.

Implication 1: Christians need to know how to do the same since both times, of ease and difficulty, present temptations and trials.

Historical Truth 2: Christ gave Paul strength to overcome any circumstance to accomplish all that God had planned for his life.

Implication 2: Christ gives Christians strength to overcome any circumstance to accomplish all God has planned for our lives.

Historical Truth 3: Paul could not accomplish any ministry through his own strength.

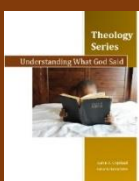
Implication 3: Christians cannot accomplish any ministry through our own strength.

3. **Meaning statement:** The meaning of the text should be concisely stated in the past-tense and not in the present-tense. The meaning statement should also list the author and the intended audience. The other truth claims serve to support the meaning statement.

“Paul wanted the Philippian church to understand that it was only through the strength of Christ, in good times and bad times, that he could accomplish his service for Him.”

4. Ensure the interpretation does not violate *hermeneutic principles* and measure the interpretation against those of various commentaries.

Final Caution! The meaning of the passage is never set in the present, or addressed to contemporary Christians. Also, the oft-heard statement “what the passage means to me is...” should never be used in any Bible study. The meaning is always objective and only what the original author intended to say to his original audience. Do not confuse the meaning of the text with its application to the modern reader.



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