

# Grasping God's Word

## A Hands-on Approach to reading, interpreting, and applying the Bible

### 1. The Interpretive Journey

The interpretive steps:

Step 1: Grasp the text in their town.

What did the text mean to the original audience?

Step 2: Measure the width of the river to cross. What are the differences between the biblical audience and us?

Step 3: Cross the principalizing bridge. What is the theological principle in this text?\*

Step 4: Grasp the text in our town.

How should individual Christians today apply the theological principle in their lives?

\*Note that between steps 3 & 4 For interpreting the OT is an additional step: Cross into the NT. Does the NT teaching modify or Qualify this principle, and if so, how?

#### Criteria for Principles

- The principle should be reflected in the text.
- The principle should be timeless and not tied to a specific situation.
- The principle should not be culturally bound.
- The principle should correspond to the teaching of the rest of the Bible.
- The principle should be relevant to both the biblical and the contemporary audience.

### 2 - 4. How to Read Sentences, Paragraphs, Discourses

*Repetition of words.* Look for words and phrases that repeat.

*Contrasts.* Look for ideas, individuals, and/or items contrasted with each other.

*Comparisons.* Look for ideas, individuals, and/or items compared with each other.

*Lists.* Whenever the text mentions more than two items, identify it as a list.

*Cause and effect.* Look for cause-and-effect relationships.

*Figures of speech.* Identify expressions that convey an image using words in a sense other than the normal literal sense.

*Conjunctions.* Notice terms that join units, like "and," "but," "for." Note what they are connecting.

*Verbs.* Note active, passive, past, present, etc.

*Pronouns.* Identify the antecedent for each pronoun.

*Questions and answers.* Note if the text is built on a question/answer format.

*Dialogue.* Note if the text includes dialogue. Identify who is speaking and to whom.

*Means.* Note if a sentence indicates that something was done *by means of* someone/thing (answers "how?"). Usually you can insert the phrase "by means of" into the sentence.

*Purpose/result sentences.* These are a more specific type of "means," often telling "why." Purpose and result are similar and sometimes indistinguishable. In a purpose statement, you usually can insert "in order that"; in a result clause, "so that."

*General ⇔ specific.* Find general statements followed by specific examples or applications. Also find specific statements that are summarized by a general one.

*Conditional clauses.* A clause can present the condition by which some action or consequence will result. Often such statements use an "if...then" framework (although in English "then" is often left out).

*Actions/roles of God.* Identify actions or roles that the text ascribes to God.

*Actions/roles of people.* Identify actions or roles that the text ascribes to people or encourages people to do/be.

*Emotional terms.* Does the passage use terms with emotional energy, like kinship words (father, son) or words like "pleading"?

*Tone of the passage.* What is the overall tone of the passage: happy, sad, encouraging, etc.?

*Chiasm.* Does the passage have any chiasmic arrangements, like a-b-c-d-c'-b'-a'?

*Interchange.* Does the passage shift back and forth between two scenes or characters?

*Connections to other paragraphs and episodes.* How does the passage connect to the one that precedes it and the one that follows it?

*Shifts in the story/pivots.* Is the passage being used as a key to understanding a dramatic shift in the story?

### 5. What Do We Bring to the Text?

1. The Bible is the Word of God. Although God worked through people to produce it, it is nonetheless inspired by the Holy Spirit and is God's Word to us.
2. The Bible is trustworthy and true.
3. God has entered into human history; thus supernatural (miracles, etc.) does occur.
4. The Bible is not contradictory; it is unified, yet diverse. Nevertheless, God is bigger than we are, and he is not always easy to comprehend.

*Presuppositions* don't change each time we study a passage.

*Preunderstanding* refers to all of our preconceived notions and understandings that we bring to the text that have been formulated, both consciously and subconsciously, *before* we actually study the text in detail.

*Our culture produces interpretational reflex:*

1. We tend to fill in all of the gaps and ambiguities in the biblical texts with explanations from our culture.
2. Our cultural background performs a parameter of limiting possibilities for a text even before we grapple with the intended meaning. In this situation, based on our culture we subconsciously create a world of

Interpretive possibilities and a world of interpretive impossibilities.

## 6. Historical-Cultural Context

- *Historical-cultural context* relates to everything outside of the text (e.g., information about the biblical writer, biblical audience, and other elements related to the historical-cultural situation).
- A *valid interpretation* must be consistent with the historical-cultural context.
- Avoid *inaccurate background information* and resist the temptation to place background above the text.
- Use *tools* such as Bible handbooks, introductions and surveys, commentaries, atlases, dictionaries, and encyclopedias to discover the historical-cultural context.

## 7. Literary Context

The most important principle of biblical interpretation is that *context determines meaning*. Literary context includes literary genre and surrounding context.

*Literary genre* refers to the different types of literature found in the Bible (OT genres: narrative, law, poetry, prophecy, wisdom; NT genres: gospel, history, letter, apocalyptic; subgenres: parables, riddles, etc.)

*Surrounding context* includes the units that surround the one you are studying. Within the surrounding context the immediate context (what comes immediately before and after your passage) is the most important.

You can make the Bible say anything you want only if you ignore the literary context.

*How to identify the surrounding context:*

1. Divide the entire book into paragraphs or sections.
2. Summarize the main idea of each section.
3. Explain how your particular passage relates to the surrounding sections.

## 8. Word Studies

Fallacies: English-only, root, time-frame, overload, word-count,

word-concept, selective evidence.

*Semantic range:* All the possible meanings of a word.

Proper word studies are concerned with the *original Greek or Hebrew words*, not an English translation.

Steps involved in a proper word study:

1. Choose your words carefully.
2. Determine what the word could mean (i.e., determine the entire semantic range for this word based on biblical usage).
3. Determine what the word does mean in context.

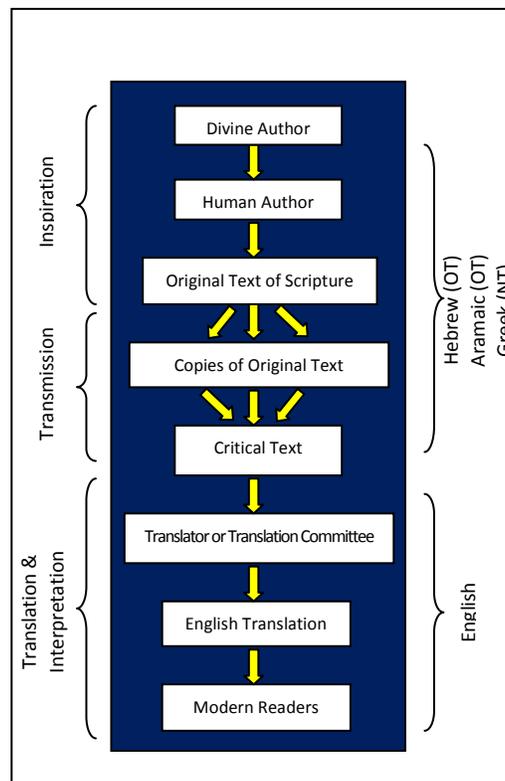
Context determines word meaning. The aim is to determine what the author intended to convey by a particular word in a particular context.

## 9. Bible Translations

The OT was written in Hebrew, the NT in Greek.

*Autographs:* the original documents of Scripture.

*Textual criticism:* the technical discipline that compares the various copies of a biblical text in an effort to determine what was most likely the original text.



*Bible translation:* involves moving the meaning of a text in one language (source language) to another language (receptor language).

*English Bibles prior to 1611:* Wycliffe Bible, William Tyndale's NT, Coverdale Bible, Great Bible, Geneva Bible, Bishop's Bible.

*Authorized Version of 1611* (KJV) was revised several times up until 1769. The 1769 revision is the one still being printed today.

Readers today have two main problems With the KJV: (1) the translators used an inferior Greek text constructed from a few late manuscripts, and (2) many of its words and phrases have become archaic or obsolete.

*Approaches to Bible translation.* The *more formal* approach tries to stay as close as possible to the structure and words of the original text. The *more functional* approach tries to express the meaning of the original text in today's language using equivalent words and structures. See Translation Spectrum (*next page*).

## 10. Who Controls the Meaning?

*Authorial intention:* the approach that stresses the author in the determination of meaning.

*Reader response:* the approach that stresses the reader as the main player in determining meaning.

The central issue is *communication*. If we are reading a text for communication, then we must follow the authorial intention approach. In our study of Scripture, we do not create meaning. Rather, we seek to discover the meaning that has been placed there by the author.

*Meaning* refers to that which the author wishes to convey with his signs (e.g., grammar, syntax, word meanings, etc.).

*Application* is what a reader does with the meaning. Meaning is set by the author and thus does not change from reader to reader. Application, however, varies for different readers.

## 11. Levels of meaning

*Literary meaning* is the meaning intended by the author (human and divine) and thus includes spiritual meaning. "*Spiritualizing*" occurs when we try to read deep, "spiritual" meanings into the text that the authors never intended; it is a product of our imagination.

*Allegory* is a story in which the author uses an extensive amount of symbolism.

## Translation Spectrum

More Formal								More Functional	
KJV ASV	NASB NKJV ESV	RSV HCSB	NRSV NET	NIV TNIV	NJB REB	NCV NLT	GNB CEV	The Message	

*Allegorical interpretation* usually involves trying to see deep spiritual meanings and connections that are not in the text.

*Typology* is a historical event or person in the Old Testament that serves as a prophetic pattern or example of a New Testament event or person, usually Jesus.

*Gematria* is a Jewish system of interpretation that assigns number values to each letter of the Hebrew alphabet and then looks for meanings based on these numbers.

*Equidistant Letter Sequencing (ELS)* is a fanciful, bogus approach to studying Scripture that analyzes letter spacings in the Hebrew Bible and looks for hidden words in the spacings.

## 12. The Role of the Holy Spirit

Author of the Bible includes both the human author and the divine Author.

*Inspiration* refers to the Holy Spirit's work in the lives of the human authors of Scripture with the result that they wrote what God wanted to communicate.

*Illumination* refers to the ongoing work of the Spirit of bringing believers to understand and receive the truth of Scripture. The Spirit and the Word work together and must never be set against one another.

*People without the Spirit* may use valid interpretive methods to comprehend much of the Bible, but they will not accept its truth and apply it to their lives.

In *relation to the Christian interpreter*, the Spirit (1) does not make valid interpretations automatic, but expects us to use proper methods and quality resources, (2) does not create new meaning, but will help us find meaning already present, and (3) does not change the Bible to fit our circumstances, but will bring the meaning to bear on the reader. Our spiritual maturity will affect our ability to hear the voice of the Spirit (the divine Author) in the Scriptures.

## 13. Application

*Meaning* refers to what the author intended to communicate through the text; *application* refers to the response of the reader to the meaning of the inspired text.

*How to apply meaning:*

- After summarizing the original situation and the meaning of the text for the biblical audience, identify the differences between the biblical situation and list the theological principles communicated by the passage.
- Observe how the principles in the text address the original situation. This will result in several key elements.
- Discover a parallel situation in a contemporary context.
- Make the applications specific, perhaps by creating "real-world scenarios" (contemporization) that faithfully reflect the meaning of the text and relate relevantly to the contemporary audience.

## 14. New Testament Letters

NT letters serve *authoritative substitutes* for the personal presence of their authors.

They are *occasional* or *situational*, meaning that they were written to address specific situations or problem in the communities that received the letters. They are most concerned with applying theology in practical ways to real-life situations.

They were also meant to be read aloud over and over in local congregations.

NT letters offer a window into the struggles and victories of the early church.

To *interpret a NT letter*, apply four steps of the Interpretive Journey to the letter.

## 15. Gospels

Gospels are *ancient biographies* of Jesus Christ with *two primary purposes*: (1) to pass on the story of Jesus and (2) through the story of Jesus to say something important to the first readers (and to us).

These two purposes provide the *framework for reading the Gospels*:

- What is this particular episode or story telling us about Jesus?
- What is the Gospel writer trying to communicate to his readers by the way he connects stories together?

In *reading individual stories* responsibly, ask the standard story questions: *Who? What? When? Where? Why? and How?*

To *read a series of stories*, look for connections (i.e., common themes or patterns, cause and effect, transitions or conjunctions, differences between stories, role of key characters, especially Jesus).

Pay attention to *special literary forms* in the Gospels: exaggeration, metaphor and simile, narrative irony, rhetorical questions, parallelism, and parables.

*Parable*: a story with two levels of meaning, where certain details represent something else. The *key interpretive rule* is to look for one main point per main character (or group of characters) that Jesus' original audience would have understood.

## 16. Acts

- *Luke* and *Acts* are two volumes of a single work.
- *Acts* is the story of the *spread of Christianity* across the New Testament world.
- *Acts* is *theological history* that records the story of the Spirit working through the church to carry the gospel to the world.
- Acts 1-12: Christian mission to the Jews (Peter)
- Acts 13-28: Christian mission to the Gentiles (Paul)

The *main themes of Acts* include: Holy Spirit, God's sovereignty, the church, prayer, suffering, the Gentiles, and witness.

*Guidelines* for determining what is normative (practices from the early church we ought to repeat) or descriptive (practices that are not necessarily to be repeated).

- Look for what Luke intended to communicate to his readers.
- Look for positive (to be imitated) and negative (to be avoided) examples in characters of the story.
- Read individual passages in light of the overall story of Acts and the rest of the New Testament.

- Look to the rest of Acts to clarify what is normative.
- Look for repeated patterns and themes.

## 17. Revelation

The word “*revelation*” (*apokalypsis* in Greek) suggests that something once hidden is now being unveiled or openly displayed.

*Original contexts:* false religion is forming a partnership with pagan political and economic power to pressure those who claim to follow Christ. Will they compromise with the world to avoid persecution or openly confess Christ and experience trouble?

Revelation is a *prophetic-apocalyptic letter* that uses strange images to bring heavenly perspective and hope to a struggling people. The main message of Revelation is God will win!

*Guidelines* for reading Revelation:

- Read Revelation with humility.
- Try to discover the message to the original readers.
- Don’t try to discover a strict chronological map of future events.
- Take Revelation seriously, but don’t always take it literally.
- Pay close attention when John identifies an image.
- Look to the Old Testament and the historical context of the books when interpreting images and symbols.

## 18. OT Narrative

Biblical narratives are *theological history*.

The meaning derives primarily from the action of the characters.

Not all of the human characters are “good” models for us.

God is often a central character in the story.

*Narrator* is a synonym for author.

Narrative episodes are usually longer in the OT than the NT.

*Literary features of OT narrative:* Plot, setting, characters, viewpoint of the narrator, comparison/contrast, and irony.

## 19. OT Law

*Traditional approach:* distinguishes between moral, civil, and ceremonial laws (not an appropriate distinction). Rather:

1. Study the law within its narrative context.
2. Interpret the law within its covenant context.
  - a. The Mosaic covenant is associated with the conquest and occupation of the land.
  - b. Blessings for the Mosaic covenant are conditional.
  - c. The Mosaic covenant is no longer a functional covenant.
  - d. The OT law as part of the Mosaic covenant is no longer applicable as law.
  - e. We must interpret the law through the grid of NT teaching.

## 20. Poetry

*Elements of OT Poetry:*

- Terseness (minimum number of words)
- Structure
  1. Parallelism (synonymous, developmental, illustrative, contrastive, formal).
  2. Acrostics

Figurative Imagery:

1. Analogy (simile, metaphor, indirect analogy, hyperbole, personification)
2. Substitution (effects and causes, representation)
3. Miscellaneous (apostrophe, irony)
4. Wordplays

The function of Psalms: to “give us inspired models of how to talk and sing to God.”

## 21. OT Prophets

*Basic prophetic message:*

1. You have broken the covenant; you had better repent!
2. No repentance? The judgment!
3. Yet, there is hope beyond the judgment for a glorious, future restoration.

*Three indictments:*

1. Idolatry
2. Social injustice
3. Religious ritualism

## 22. OT Wisdom Books

*Wisdom:* that combination of knowledge and character that allows one to live in the real world in a right and godly manner.

*Proverbs:* the rational ordered norms of life.

The exceptions to Proverbs:

*Job*—the suffering of the righteous

*Ecclesiastes*—the failure of the rational, ordered approach to provide ultimate meaning to life.

*Song of Songs*—the irrationality of romantic love between a husband and a wife.

“I have heard what the prophets said, that prophesy lies in my name, saying,  
I have dreamed, I have dreamed...

The prophet that has a dream, let him tell a dream;  
and he that has My Word, let him speak My Word faithfully.

What is the chaff to the wheat? Says the LORD.”

Jeremiah 23:25, 28