

# Reading It Well

## *Making Sense of God's Word*

### II. What did he mean? (Interpretation)

(what did the author intend to communicate to the original audience)

*Interpretation* is the process of determining the *one* single meaning of the biblical text as intended by the original author. It answers the question, "What did the *original* author say to the *original* audience."

Four rules:

1. Interpret \_\_\_\_\_
2. Interpret in \_\_\_\_\_
3. Interpret considering \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_
4. Interpret considering \_\_\_\_\_

#### ***Rule #1: Interpret Literally***

***Interpret literally, taking words, phrases, and sentences in their usual, natural sense.***

How do we determine the meaning of a word?

1. \_\_\_\_\_ meanings – words usually have a range of meanings
2. \_\_\_\_\_ (rule #2 above)
3. For help, use whatever resource tools you have, such as a dictionary

Example: Do the words "save" or "salvation" always refer to the same thing?

**The disciples went and woke him, saying, "Lord, *save* us! We're going to drown!" (Matt. 8:25)**

\_\_\_\_\_

**They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be *saved* — you and your household."  
(Acts 16:31)**

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Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your *salvation*, (1 Pet. 2:2). *Note: the NKJV and KJV do not include "in your salvation"*

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who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the *salvation* that is ready to be revealed in the last time. (1 Pet. 1:5)

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Two aspects of literal interpretation:

1. \_\_\_\_\_ language – normal meaning

**“So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen wrappings with the spices, as is the custom of the Jews.” (John 19:40)**

2. \_\_\_\_\_ language (figures of speech)

We still consider this literal interpretation because the author intends to convey a specific idea with the figurative language.

**Example: “If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away...” (Matt. 5:29)**

*Note: You will find a list of some common figures of speech used in the Bible at the end of this handout*

## ***Rule #2: Interpret in Context***

***The context may well be the most useful tool to help us correctly interpret a passage!***

Context refers to the words \_\_\_\_\_ a particular word or passage and determines its meaning. When looking at the context, we want to look at the surrounding

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Examples:

(1) This He said, and after that He said to them, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I go, so that I may awaken him out of sleep.” (John 11:11)

The context: John 11:13. What does "sleep" mean in John 11:11?

(2) and My people who are called by My name humble themselves and pray and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, will forgive their sin and will heal their land. (2 Chron. 7:14)

*Who are "my people"?*

*Why would their land need "healing"?*

### **Rule #3: Interpret considering history and culture**

"History" addresses two issues.

- (1) The \_\_\_\_\_ of \_\_\_\_\_ (what has God revealed in His Word)
- (2) \_\_\_\_\_ – those surrounding the author and audience or those referred to by the author

By "culture", we mean the \_\_\_\_\_ in which the author and audience lived. Scripture contains many passages that reflect the culture of a particular people at a particular time in their history.

Example:

***Now when Peter had come to Antioch, I withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed; for before certain men came from James, he would eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision. (Gal. 2:11-12)***

The cultural issue: \_\_\_\_\_ with \_\_\_\_\_

The historical issue: \_\_\_\_\_



## ***Rule # 4. Interpret considering biblical consistency***

Dealing with problem passages or unclear passages

1. The Bible will never \_\_\_\_\_ itself
2. Choose a \_\_\_\_\_ meaning over a more \_\_\_\_\_ meaning
3. Interpret the passage in question in light of \_\_\_\_\_ that address the same issue
4. Different accounts of the same event are likely complementary, not contradictory (different details, perspectives)
5. If the character and nature of God are unchanging, then theology will not \_\_\_\_\_.
6. Remember: Just because we don't have a complete answer does not mean one does not exist. When we're unsure, be careful not to act as if we are!

*Parallel passages or parallel concepts often help us understand the passage we are studying*

Practice: *Based solely on "biblical consistency," is the correct interpretation that salvation is a result of works?*

**So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling (Philippians 2:12)**

*[No! - it is dealing with sanctification]*

## ***Interpretation: What about commentaries?***

They are useful, but

(1) Use them last (don't start with them!)

(2) Use carefully. Remember, they are the work of someone else's interpretation, and their biases, perspectives - some of which you may not agree with! - may influence what they say.

### ***Common figures of speech in the Bible***

1. Comparisons using “like” or “as” (simile)  
“All men are like grass” (1 Pet. 1:24)
2. Comparisons using a form of “to be,” where one thing represents another. Uses form of “to be” (metaphor)  
“You are the salt of the earth.” (Matt. 5:13)
3. Giving human characteristics to objects, ideas, or animals” (personification)  
“The trees of the field will clap their hands” (Isa. 55:12)
4. Ascribing human characteristics to God (anthropomorphism)  
“The hand of God was upon us” (Ezra 8:31)
5. Idiom – a peculiar way of saying something in a particular language  
“breaking of bread” (Acts 2:42)
6. Substituting an inoffensive or mild expression for a more offensive or harsh term (euphemism)  
some “have fallen asleep” (1 Cor. 11:30)
7. Exaggerating for emphasis (hyperbole)  
“The whole world would not have room” (Jn 21:25)
8. Using sarcasm to convey it’s opposite (irony)  
“Shout louder, surely he is god.” (1 Kings 18:27)
9. Substituting two contrasting ideas to express the whole (merism)  
“You know when I sit and when I rise” (Ps. 139:2)