

Interpreting Scripture #1: Reading & Understanding the Bible

COURSE OVERVIEW

The goal of this course is personal transformation through a greater understanding of the Bible.

We do not read or study the Bible merely to gain knowledge, but to grow in our relationship with God and to be transformed into Christ's image.

INTRODUCTION

1. God has given us the responsibility to seek to understand the Bible.

II Timothy 2:15

Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth.

2. The Bible records several qualities that are necessary to understand God's Word.

- We must have a strong desire to know God's truth. (Psalm 119:20)

**"My soul is consumed with longing for Your laws at all times."
(Psalm 119:20)**

- We must humble ourselves before the Lord. (Psalm 25:9)

**"He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them His way."
(Psalm 25:9)**

- We must approach God's Word with faith. (Hebrews 11:6)

**"And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to Him must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him."
(Hebrews 11:6)**

- We must trust the Holy Spirit to be our teacher. (John 14:26)

“But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you.” (John 14:26)

- We must fear the Lord. (Psalm 25:14)

“The secret of the Lord is for those who fear Him, and He will make them know His covenant.” (Psalm 25:14)

THE NATURE OF THE BIBLE

1. Inspired. The bible is the inspired word of God.

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness... (2 Timothy 3:16, ESV)

- Inspired by God: The biblical authors were not passive instruments in the transmission of divine revelation. God used each author’s personality and manner of expression.

2. Inerrancy. The Bible is entirely trustworthy because of its truthfulness, and therefore is dependable as a source.

- Inerrancy allows for the use of popular expressions, approximations, and phenomenological language.

Phenomenological language is simply the description of experiences and the world from the vantage point of what can be understood through our human senses. For example, the structure of the cosmos is described from this vantage point as opposed to a modern, scientific vantage point.

- Inerrancy allows for variety in style and detail when explaining the same event.
- Inerrancy does not demand verbatim reporting of events.

For example, recorded speeches are not necessarily an exact word-for-word report.

3. Infallibility. The Bible is completely reliable because of its truthfulness, and therefore is dependable as a guide.

“The Bible, when correctly interpreted in light of the level to which culture and the means of communication had developed at the time it was written, and in view of the purposes for which it was given, is fully truthful in all that it affirms.” (Millard Erickson, Christian Theology, 2nd Edition; Baker Book House, 1998, p. 259)

REVELATION

1. God reveals himself to mankind in such a way that we can know him and fellowship with him.

- General Revelation is God’s communication of himself to all persons at all times and in all places. It is sufficient to prompt belief in God, reverence toward God, and concern for one’s relationship with God.

God uses the creation, his acts of providence, and our consciences to reveal general truths about himself to humanity.

- Special Revelation is God’s communication of himself to select persons with the purpose of having it proclaimed to all people. Special revelation goes beyond general revelation, revealing greater truths about God and his plan of salvation.

Special revelation includes personal communication from God (through divine speech, dreams, prophecies, etc.), Scripture (which is of higher authority), and ultimately, Jesus Christ (who speaks to us in and through Scripture).

- Special revelation is commonly called God’s word or Holy Scripture, which was written down and bequeathed via Israel and later the apostolic church to the entire world.

2. A sound approach to Scripture includes the understanding that God condescended to reveal universal, truths about his redemptive purposes through the medium of human knowledge and experience.

- Human authorship, occasion, audience, literary genre, *et cetera*, are often critical to a sound understand of any given text.

THE BIBLE CAN BE UNDERSTOOD

1. Although some things in Scripture are hard to understand, the vast majority of God's Word can be readily understood – even by children. (Deuteronomy 6:6, 7)

“These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.” (Deuteronomy 6:6, 7)

2. The plain words of Scripture are reliable, and God based the communication of truth on regular laws of written communication.

In order to determine what the Bible is saying, the rules of grammar and rhetoric must be considered, along with the historical and cultural context in which it was written.

SOME OBSTACLES TO UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE

1. History: we are separated from the historical events by thousands of years.

The Bible is a record of the words God spoke through real people to real circumstances in real places at real times. Therefore, every text has an historical context that helps determine its meaning.

2. Culture: we live in a vastly different culture from the original recipients of the Scriptures.

We can discern some of the cultural issues of the passage we are studying through a careful reading of the text. But to gain a thorough understanding of the cultural framework, we will need to consult other references.

3. Language: the Bible was written in ancient languages we don't speak.

We need to rely on good translations, and use more than one. We can also consult other references to gain insight into the original meaning of words, phrases, etc.

4. Literary Genre: the Bible was written in many different literary styles.

You do not read poetry the same way you would read a legal document. Each literary genre has its own unique characteristics.

5. Biases: we come to the text with many of our own ideas.

When we read the Bible we bring to the text our own ideas and biases. The more we are aware our own biases, the greater chance we will have to transcend them.

6. Sin.

Sin hardens the heart and darkens the understanding.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is the biggest obstacle you face in understanding the Bible? What could help you overcome?
2. Which of the following qualities necessary for understanding God's Word do you feel you are weakest in? What can you do to strengthen them?
 - We must have a strong desire to know God's truth.
 - We must humble ourselves before the Lord.
 - We must approach God's Word with faith.

HOMEWORK

Select one of the following:

1. Choose a shorter book from the New Testament (such as Philippians, Colossians, II Timothy, James, or I John) and read it every day for a week. Try reading it in different translations on alternate days. Try reading silently and aloud. If possible, listen to someone else read it to you (such as an audio book). Record your thoughts.
2. Choose a passage from the New Testament and read it every day for a week. Read it from several different translations. Analyze it carefully. Ask yourself many questions about the text. Try to identify significant verses, as well as any key words or phrases. Carefully observe details and record your thoughts.