

How to Approach Scripture

A layman's hermeneutics

The Goal

In **2 Timothy 3:15-17**, our purpose in reading scripture is to be equipped thoroughly for every good work. To do this we must approach Scripture with the purpose to hear something from God that enhances my relationship to God thru Jesus Christ.

Thus the goal is to see Jesus in His Word to me, *“to make you wise unto salvation thru Christ” v15*
As you read Scripture, Scripture reads you, questions you, reveals your thoughts (Heb. 4:12) - and it leads to a Person, not just truths or principles. All Scripture points to Christ's death and resurrection; to God's forgiveness, thus leading you to a personal relationship with God through Christ.

Approach Scripture with a strong desire to be fully equipped to be what I am called of God to be, and to do what I am called of God to do.

- Don't leave the Word until like Jacob of old *“you have laid hold of that which has laid hold of you”*
- Wrestle with the text until it yields to you, and you find it to be honey to your taste & gold to your soul.

Six good questions the interpreter can ask:

1. Where does the Text fit in the narrative of Bible history?

Each Bible text must be interpreted in light of God's bigger story of redemption & restoration. See the Bible not as many stories or stories within stories; but see it as God's BIG story. The Bible only has one story, a story of Father/God redeeming mankind and restoring what was lost in the Garden.

1) Where does the text fit into this bigger Story?

On a time line, where does the text fit into the greater story of *“God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself” 2 Cor. 5:19?* Is it before the patriarchs-Abraham, Isaac and Jacob? Is it before the Law of Moses or after? Is it in the Gospels and thus before the fullness of the Spirit in the Church age?

2) Ask yourself, “What covenant was in effect when it was written”?

Is this text an old covenant truth (or promise) or is it a fulfilled new covenant truth. How you decide this, will greatly affect how you interpret the text.

2. What would the original hearers have heard?

Without asking this question you will fall into speculation, allegory, and spiritualizing the text. Ask, “How did the 1st recipients receive or view its meaning”? In order answer this question you must read and understand the text in its original context. There are at least two kinds of context for a passage of Scripture.

Literary context:

The interpreter must have knowledge that the Scriptures include various kinds of literature and thus require different approaches to interpretation. First ask yourself, “What kind of literature is the book or the text”?

Is it a narrative? Many books in the Bible are narratives. A narrative is a story or a drama being told. This includes books such as Genesis, Exodus, Deuteronomy, Numbers, 1st & 2nd Samuel, 1st & 2nd Kings, Acts, and others.

Is it wisdom literature? Books such as Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon are what we call “wisdom” literature. This type of literature is different from narratives in that it is often filled with poetic language, or prose that uses hyperbole, allegory, or repeated phrases for emphasis.

Is it Prophetic literature? The prophets enforce God’s covenant with Israel by asking, “why is God doing what He is doing & what will be the results of disobedience. This literature has its own features such as the “oracle” or “vision” which are unique to the prophets.

The four Gospels: These are Holy Spirit inspired biographies of Christ’s life, message and sacrifice. Each was written by different authors for different purposes, but all are telling the same story of Christ’s life, teachings, death, burial, resurrection and ascension into heaven. The interpreter needs to know the gospel writers intended recipients and purpose to give correct meaning to the gospel he is reading.

Example: Luke was not an eye witness to Jesus ministry. He was a like a reporter collecting data from eye witnesses and writing them down. He wrote his gospel account to send to his friend Theophilus.

However, John the Apostle, an eye witness to Jesus life and teachings, tells us why he wrote his gospel. In **John 20:31** he says, “*but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name*”. This is why we call the Gospel of John-the gospel of belief. John wrote his gospel story of Jesus to non-Jews; yet, Matthew’s gospel is very much written to convince Jews that Jesus is the long awaited Messiah, the promised Son of David. The theme of Matthew’s gospel is “fulfilled”.

Is it a parable? A parable is a unique kind of literature. It is an earthly story with a heavenly (eternal) meaning. The details of a parable are often not meant to be taken literally. It uses illustrative, pictorial, and dramatic language. If the reader concludes this parable is literally truth, he will make great mistakes and misunderstand God’s true meaning.

For example, in Luke chapter 8 is Christ’s parable of the sower and the seed. This story is highly symbolic, not meant to be taken literally. In Luke 8:19, Jesus says, “*The seed is the word of God*”. You know don’t you that a farmer’s seed put into soil is not literally the same as the Holy Spirit putting God’s Word into your heart. It is the symbolic language of a parable.

Is it apocalyptic literature? Such is the book of Revelation, which is highly symbolic, requiring some knowledge of this type of literature to correctly understand its intended meaning. Its images of dragons, angels, demons, wars, and monsters with seven heads can be bewildering to those not familiar with this Jewish apocalyptic prophetic style.

Is it an epistle? The epistles are letters written to persons or churches. Letters from apostles Paul, Peter, James, and Jude are apostolic letters written to real people and churches, but written under the Holy Spirit’s guidance and inspiration.

So, the literary context demands reading the text carefully, considering the words, sentences, and paragraphs preceding and following a passage. The literary context locates the passage within the larger purposes of a book.

Example: See **Luke 17:5** where the disciples said to Jesus, *“Increase our faith”*.

The context will show this is not a prayer for more faith, but the opposite- it is a statement of doubt. If you did not read *“Lord, increase our faith”* in its immediate context you would miss its true meaning.

Notice also that a literary context looks for the place of the text in the entire book. Ask yourself, “What is the nature of the purpose of the Book”? Our goal is to discover the author’s original intent.

Example: Any time you see a “therefore” in the writings of Paul, you must go back to the preceding Paragraph, or even chapters, to see what the “therefore” is referring to. By doing this, you discover what the “therefore” is “there- for”. It is there for a reason!

Romans 12:1 begins, *“therefore, I urge you brethren...”* Here, Paul’s “therefore” is based upon all God’s mercies sited in **Romans 3-11**. Paul is saying that because of all that God has done for us in Christ, we therefore should present our life before him as a living sacrifice in service to His glory.

Historical context

What is the historical background of a text that might either shed light on its meaning or culturally influence its interpretation? This must include the reader’s knowledge of the culture, place in history, customs, idioms, family life, morals and social structures of the date and time the passage or book was written. Ask yourself, “How did the 1st recipients receive or view its meaning”? What did the author intend for them to hear?

A good example is the apostle Paul writing to the Roman church saying *“Jacob I have loved, Esau I have hated”* (**Romans 9:13**). What does this mean? Surely God does not hate Esau? When Paul wrote this to his recipients in Rome they understood this quote from Malachi 1:21. The Jews in Rome to whom he was writing had knowledge of the Scriptures to understand the story of Jacob and Esau. This is why a serious Bible student needs the following study aids:

- A good Study Bible
- A Bible Dictionary or Encyclopedia
- A scholarly Bible Commentary

(Many of these Bible aids are available on the internet for your use)

3. How does the Text relate to the Christ event?

Ask yourself, “How does this text relate to Christ- the Living Word of God”? Jesus told us to search the Scriptures looking for him on every page. He said in **John 5:39**, *“Search the Scriptures; it is these that testify of me”*. See also Christ’s teaching on this in **Luke 24:25-27**.

Thus every Scripture must be interpreted Christologically. This means that when reading a text or passage of Scripture, the interpreter is looking for how the text, especially an old covenant text, foreshadows the Messiah, Jesus, or the Church.

This is the meaning of **Hebrews 1:1-2**, *“Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.”*

4. How does the whole of the Bible comment on the text and on the partial?

The interpreter must let the fullness of Scripture unfold the partial. This is another way of saying that the BIG story of the Bible must always influence how we read and understand the smaller stories.

Example: In Exodus chapter 20 Moses receives the Ten Commandments. We need the new covenant teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount to rightly interpret the Law, and the teaching of Rabbi Paul in Galatians to tell us the purpose of the Law. Thus the new covenant fulfills the old.

5. What in this text applies to me that I need to respond to?

Scripture must not be read just for study or your personal knowledge. Since all Scripture is pointing to Christ, we read in order to worship, to serve, and to magnify Him. We must ask, “How does this ancient text relate to me today”?

The reader can ask himself four questions to help in application of Scripture to one’s life:

- What should I do?
- What should I be? (realizing who I am in Christ)
- Where should I go?
- How can I see?
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Here are some other questions you can ask to aid in the personal application of truth:

- Try rewriting the text in your own language seeking application to your life.
- How does being “in Christ” relate to my understanding of the text?
- What is required of me if I apply the meaning of the text to me?
- How can I take what God has said to me and give it to someone else?
- What action do I take based on this?

6. How does God get His truth into us?

1. He speaks eternally thru His inspired Word—the Holy Scriptures -**2nd Timothy 3:16, 17**

2. God speaks to us thru His Spirit- see **John 14-15**

We must always acknowledge the unity of the Spirit and the Word- we cannot understand truth apart from the Holy Spirit who is the Spirit of truth. It is the Holy Spirit who can “rightly divide” the Word He wrote. You must prayerfully ask Him to be your teacher.

3. God speaks to us thru His Spirit in His gifted Saints.

Here are some of the ways the Holy Spirit gets truth into us:

- 1) The Holy Spirit gives us illuminated understanding.
- 2) The Holy Spirit can interpret His Word (which He inspired)
- 3) The Spirit will guide us to consensus thru the community of Believers. (Acts 15)
- 4) The Spirit has given the Church grace gifts thru whom He speaks.

The Holy Spirit speaks truth to us through spiritually gifted believers- pastors, teachers, prophets, evangelists etc.