

Session Four: How to Study the Bible - Interpretation

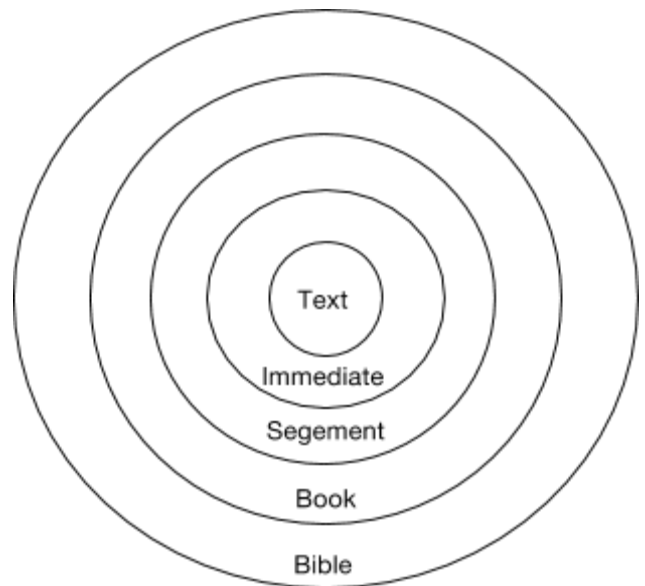
1. Introduction

- a. Our goal over this eight week teaching series is to learn how to prayerfully study the Bible so that we can hear and encounter Christ.
- b. To do this we are following Martin Luther's four step model called *A Simple Way to Pray*. Luther's model consists of a series of questions that help you engage with the Bible and turn it into prayer. They are:
 - i. Instruction: *What is this scripture telling me to believe or do?*
 - ii. Thanksgiving: *What worship and praise is due God?*
 - iii. Confession: *What sin do I need to confess and repent of?*
 - iv. Prayer: *How can I pray for my own life and for those around me?*
- c. Starting with step one, *Instruction*, Luther rightly notes that in order to properly pray or meditate on a passage of Scripture you first had to have some measure of understanding about what the passage is saying.
- d. Thus we are starting our series with a simple process regarding how to study the Bible. To learn how to become students of the Bible we have laid out the following three step process:
 - i. Observation - What do I see?
 - ii. Interpretation - What does this mean?
 - iii. Application - What should I believe or do?
- e. We have concluded the first step of observing what terms, structures, and grammatical clues are found within the text. This step is crucial because it paves the pathway to proper interpretation and application.
- f. The more time you spend observing by looking for connections, asking questions about particular words, thinking through certain images, etc. the easier and more accurate your interpretation and application will become which will create a more powerful and intimate time of prayer.

2. Interpretation

- a. The move from observation to interpretation is a very easy and natural one. As you discover all the pieces of the puzzle you will naturally begin to put them together to create the whole picture.
- b. What do we mean by interpretation? The essential question we are asking is, "What does this mean?" That is our question.
 - i. To many people ask, "What does this mean *to me*?" The difference here is huge. In the first question I am on the outside of the text looking in trying to understand. In the second the text is outside of me (so to speak).
 1. Put another way in the first the text is the in driver's seat and in the second I am in the driver's seat.

- c. Why does interpretation matter so much? Three reasons:
- i. We all already interpret the Bible and God. Every time you read the Scriptures you are interpreting so you can't get away from it.
 - ii. How you interpret determines your view of God. The character and nature of God is at stake which is, needless to say, no small thing.
 - iii. You will live according to your view of God.
- d. There are however some important interpretative keys to remember when studying Scripture. These keys will not only help you rightly interpret a particular passage they will also keep you from making interpretive errors.
- i. Keep it in context - Every passage has a context which it is grounded in. There are four primary contexts that every passage of the Bible has. How does the passage(s) you are studying fit into each of these contexts?



1. **Immediate** - The two or three verses before and after the particular verse you are looking at. Whatever makes up the most immediate complete thought.
2. **Segment** - A segment is the complete idea/argument/story that a particular verse lives in. This may range from a paragraph or two all the way to a numerous chapters in length. (*Ex. Romans 9-11*)
3. **Book** - Every book of the Bible has a particular overarching message and/or theme. A book represents an author's complete set of thoughts and thus every verse within that book is grounded in the overall message of the book.
 - a. Included in this is considering what genre of literature the book you are reading is. Genre plays a large part in how you interpret a certain passage. You have to treat the poetry of the Psalms which is filled with images and metaphors differently than you do the historical accounts found in 1 Samuel.
4. **The Bible** - Likewise every book follows the overarching theme of the Bible. The whole of Scripture is telling a four part story:
 - a. Creation - God created all things for His glory and pleasure.
 - b. Fall - We rejected God to chase our own glory and pleasure.
 - c. Redemption - Christ has come to save and reconcile humanity back to God.

- d. Restoration - God will, one day, restore all things by removing evil so that all that exists is filled with goodness and joy forever.
- 5. History, culture, and geography** - The Bible is firmly rooted in history and thus it is rooted in time, place, and culture. You do not have to be an expert in Jewish history or culture to understand the Bible. However there are portions of the Bible that are more directly related to issues of the day than others. (*Ex. 1 Corinthians 8-10*)
- ii. Start with the plain sense meaning - Before you go looking for “deep revelations” simply start with what appears to be the plain sense interpretation. That will give you the grounding necessary to continue digging and asking questions.
 - 1. Some people are always trying to find something new in the Bible. A new revelation, a new idea, a new truth, etc. But we should actually be doing the opposite.
 - 2. We are concerned with what the *author* originally meant. Therefore you could say we want to find the oldest meaning not the newest. This raises a few issues that we should briefly address:
 - a. *Does a passage have only one meaning or can it have multiple meanings?* Yes and no. A passage cannot mean two completely opposite things but it can have varying layers and nuances that touch on different themes or ideas.
 - b. *How can people come up with such different interpretations about the same verse?* We are all fallible in our understanding and ability comprehend God’s ways. Therefore we should hold nonessential theological stances humbly and with a loose grip.
- iii. Let Scripture interpret Scripture - If you or someone comes up with an interpretation of a passage that cannot be shown in multiple other passages it most likely is a wrong interpretation.
- e. The key here, as in observation, is bombard the Scripture with questions. Ask questions about individual words. Why that word? What image is the author trying to get at? Where is that word used elsewhere? How does this word and phrase connect to the verses around it? To the theme of the book?
- f. Being a student of the Bible is largely about learning to ask good questions and be willing to search for the answers.
- g. The goal of good interpretation is not only to arrive at the “right answer” but to get their the right way. How did you arrive at that answer? What Scripture did you use? Why? What word or phrase triggered that idea?