

From Bible to Life Well Lived

ASSUMPTIONS

- Because the Bible gives us access to the mind of God, it contains mysteries that I will never fully understand given my mortal limitations and sin-ruined state.
- In response to my prayer and despite my limitations, Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit to guide my study and interpretation of the Bible, so that I can penetrate deeply into the thoughts of God encoded in his Word.
- The goal of my Spirit-led search and method of inquiry is not merely to discover a *possible* interpretation of the text but to discover the most *compelling* interpretation of the text.

METHOD

This method of study consists of three parts, each of which is divided into steps. Each numbered step engages the text from a different perspective. While this method seeks answers, it puts the emphasis on developing questions. The questions below illustrate how we can approach the text from multiple directions, inspecting the facets of the text that combine to shape its meaning.

PART ONE: FIRST THINGS FIRST

1) Pray your way into the Word.

“But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth.”
(John 16:13 NIV)

Ask the Holy Spirit to quiet your mind and clarify your thinking so that you can give full attention to meeting the Lord’s message for you preserved in the Bible.

2) Read the text multiple times in a variety of English translations and note initial impressions and questions. (biblegateway.com)

- What big idea(s) immediately leap from the text?
- What makes the text flow logically?
- What terms, expressions, or ideas do I need to study more deeply?
- What terms, expressions, or ideas disturb me?
- What terms, expression, or ideas confuse me?
- What terms, expressions, or ideas appear to conflict with other portions of God’s Word?

PART TWO: TROUBLESHOOT PROBLEM AREAS BY DETERMINING WHAT THE TEXT MEANT

1) If you are having trouble understanding the text on its own, consider it in relationship to the Bible book in which it appears.

- Am I reading in the Old or New Testament?
- Who is the most likely human author of this book?
- What is the date of composition?
- Where was the book composed?
- To whom was the book written?
- What is the overall purpose of the book?
- How are the book's contents organized?

2) If you are having trouble with the meaning of a word or finding the main point of a sentence, focus on vocabulary and grammar.

- What does that word mean?
Research the meaning of any word in the sentence whose meaning is unclear to you. Most find this necessary with technical terms used to discuss theology. This includes words like sin, righteousness, or sanctification.
- What does the grammatical structure indicate about what is important to the writer?
Writers combine words in conventional patterns to create thoughts. Look for the main idea in the subject and predicate of the sentence.
 - What is the grammatical subject of the sentence?
(This could be a person, other living thing, or an inanimate object.)
 - What is the subject doing or how is the subject being described?
(This could be a verb or adjective.)
 - What words or phrases modify the subject and the predicate?
(This could be an adverb or dependent clause.)

3) If you are having trouble with the style of writing, identify the literary genre and expectations it carries for the reader.

- What genre am I reading?
(Historical narrative, prophesy, poetry, law, wisdom, parable, epistle, apocalyptic)
- How does the author/poet expect me to read this type of literature?
- How does this genre mark the “big” idea?

- What figures of speech are being used?
- Do I fully understand the literal dimension of all metaphors?
- How is the language of the text being artfully organized to persuade?
- What cross-references to other texts in the Bible help me understand this portion of God's Word?

4) If you feel you are missing the story evolving behind the story told in the text, dig into the historical context.

- Where does this text belong on the timeline of history?
- Does the text mention a notable person from history?
- Does the text mention a notable historical event?
- What notable people or events not mentioned in the text were impacting the story of salvation at this time?

5) If you are having trouble with place names or elements of natural history, dig into the geographical realities mentioned in the text.

- Where is this text taking me and what is it like there?
- What connotations are linked to the location?
- Has anything of significance happened at this place before?
- How are people's lives being shaped by the place we find them?
- What can I discover about the habitat and habits of the animals, insects, plants, or trees in the text?
- How is the event being shaped by the geography? (historical geography)
- How is the author/poet shaping the reader with geography? (literary geography)

6) If you are having trouble understanding the mention of an artifact or element of ancient culture, investigate the cultural context.

- What did the artifact look like?
- How was the artifact made?
- How was the artifact used?
- Who participated in the cultural practice?
- What did the participants do when enacting the cultural practice?
- What did the cultural practice mean for the participants?

7) If you are getting lost in the details, stop and summarize what the text meant using these questions.

- Who is speaking?
- How is this person speaking?
(For example: in a story, figuratively, ironically, hyperbolically, passionately, disrespectfully, angrily)
- What is the writer/poet talking about?
This is the topic.
- What is the writer/poet saying about what they are talking about?
This is the point-of-view or perspective on topic.

PART THREE: BRING THE TEXT INTO YOUR LIFE BY DETERMINING WHAT THE TEXT MEANS.

1) Ask the big content questions.

- What does this text teach about God?
- What does the text teach about how God thinks about me?
- What does the text teach about how God wants me to think about the natural world or other human beings?
- What does the text teach about how God wants me to act towards the natural world and other human beings?
- How does this text repair common misunderstandings and popular misconceptions?

2) Consult the interpretation of others.

- How have others answered the questions I have asked?
- Where do the commentaries affirm my assumptions?
- Where do the commentaries force me to rethink my assumptions?
- Where is there a debate about what a portion of this text means?

3) Ask the personal application questions.

- How does this text challenge me to change my way of thinking?
- How does this text challenge me to change my way of acting?
- How does this text speak to my need for hope and reassurance?
- What content is descriptive and what is prescriptive?

Prescriptive content is affirmed as true for all time, all places, and all people. It is anchored in the unchanging nature of God and his desires.

- This includes direct teaching about God's identity and nature.
- This includes all directives that address how we think and live unless those directives fall into the category of descriptive content below.

Descriptive content includes details that are required to tell a story or divine directives designed to meet a temporary need in the story of salvation. They describe but do not prescribe.

- A cultural practice that is mentioned but not validated (slavery)
- A cultural practice temporarily mandated to meet the demands of local circumstances (forbidding men to have long hair or command for women remain silent in the church)
- A cultural practice not mandated but mentioned to illustrate an enduring principle (giving of a holy kiss or foot washing)
- A cultural practice once mandated but later changed (animal sacrifices or dietary laws)

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