

Interpreting the Word of God

ASSUMPTIONS

- Because the Bible provides access to the mind of God, it contains mysteries that I will never fully understand. This is a barrier imposed by 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 has five steps: pray, read, understand, interpret, apply. It is designed to slow and deepen our engagement with a portion of the Bible, moving us from awareness to personal application.

STEP ONE: PRAY

Lord, let your thoughts be my thoughts. Amen

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 preserved in the Bible. We have this promise from Jesus. "But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth." (John 16:13 NIV)

STEP TWO: READ

The goal of this step is familiarity.

- 1) Read the text several times to become *familiar* with the content. Consider using a variety of English translations for your readings.
- 2) Record your initial reactions.
 - What big idea(s) stand out?
 - What confuses?
 - What disturbs?
 - What conflicts with expectation?

You will have completed this step when you are no longer surprised by new content and when you have recorded your initial reaction to the verses you have read.

STEP THREE: UNDERSTAND WHAT IT MEANT

The goal in this step is to move from familiarity to understanding.

1) Determine how the verses fit the purpose and flow of thoughts within the book.

- Am I reading in the Old or New Testament?
- What unique contribution does this book make to its testament?
- What is the overall purpose of the book?
- How are its contents organized?
- Where do these verses fit into the book's organizational structure?

2) Investigate the meaning of words, phrases, and grammatical signals.

- Words provide the foundation for sentences. But words may mean something different to those living in Bible times than they mean for us today. (for example, "plow," "engagement", or "sling")
- Sentences are not word salads. They assemble words in conventional patterns (grammar). Grammar singles out main ideas and modifies those ideas with additional words, phrases, or clauses.

3) Consider the literary genre.

- What genre am I reading?
- What is the essential agreement struck between writer/reader in this genre?
- How does this genre mark the "big" idea?
- What figures of speech are being used?
- What are the literal dimensions of the metaphors at work?
- How is the language of the text being artfully organized to persuade?

4) Dig into the historical context.

- Where does the 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 backstory at this time?

5) Explore the geography.

- 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) Deepen your understanding of cultural artifacts, social relationships, and cultural practices.

- What did the artifact look like?
- How was the artifact made and used?
- What social relationships are in play?
- Are expected patterns of social relationship being observed or violated?
- What cultural practices are mentioned?
- Who participated in the cultural practice?
- What was the significance of the cultural practice for society?

You will have completed this step when you bring your understanding as close as you can to the understanding of those who first read or heard these verses.

STEP FOUR: INTERPRET WHAT IT MEANS

The goal of this step is to move from understanding to theological insight.

1) Isolate the topic and point-of-view.

- 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.

2) Dig more deeply into the point-of-view.

- 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 common misunderstandings and popular misconceptions does this text seek to repair?
- How is the key idea treated differently than in other texts that discuss the same thought?
- What content is descriptive and what content is prescriptive?

3) Consult the interpretation of others.

- Where is there a debate underway about meaning?
- 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?

You will have completed this step when you have isolated the key theology in the verses.

STEP FIVE: SEARCH FOR THE SIGNIFICANCE

The goal of this step is to move from theological insight to personal application (significance).

1) Distinguish between meaning and significance.

- Meaning is established by the inspired writer and is embedded in the text.
- Significance is that part of the meaning that applies to my life at a given moment in time.

2) 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 what I believe to be true?
- How does this text challenge me to change my way of acting?
- How does this text speak to my need for hope and reassurance?

You will have completed this step when you have allowed the message of the verses to impact how you think, believe, speak, and act.

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