

GUIDE FOR INTERPRETING DIFFERENT PARTS OF THE BIBLE¹

THE BASICS OF INTERPRETATION

- Try to understand the context of the passage, and the main themes of the book as a whole, and the overall theme of Scripture (creation, fall redemption, renewal).
- Interpret Scripture with Scripture.
- Interpret obscure & difficult statements in light of clear statements.
- The most natural (“face value”) interpretation is usually the best, recognizing that figures of speech, allegories, and other literary devices are found in Scripture.
- You do not have to understand everything about a passage to have enough application to keep you busy.

Helps for interpreting specific kinds of literature in the Bible

- If it is an **epistle**, are there indicators that the interpretation of this text is affected by its first-century context (e.g., 2Tm 4:13)? If so, is there a principle taught by the text that is applicable to the present context?
- If it is from the **Gospels**, what does it teach specifically about Christ? About following him?
- If it is from **Acts**, does the passage describe an event or establish a pattern for the church to follow? What is the relationship of the events in the story to the overall advance of the “good news” from a small, primarily Jewish movement to unhindered proclamation among the Gentiles?
- If it is a **parable**, how is the “stage set”? who is the “target”? How does the parable “catch” the target? Who is the audience (who else hears the parable)? Who are the main characters, and what realities to they represent? What is the main point(s)?
- If it is a **Psalm**, what emotions does the Psalmist express? When looking at the entire Psalm, do you see a progression (e.g., from despair to faith)? How does the verse or passage relate to the Psalm as a whole? (Note: f it is an **imprecatory**² **Psalm** remember that: the Psalmist was often a king, and the king’s enemies were the people’s enemies, and therefore God’s enemies; the judgment sought is often related to the covenant blessings and curses found in Dt 28, and is often described in very vivid, passionate terms; the NT teaches that it is *wrong* to seek revenge for personal wrongs, but it is *right* to pray about it when we have those desires!)
- If it is from the **wisdom** books (Prov, Ecc, SS, or Job), what is the relationship of the passage to the overall teaching about wisdom? What is the basic life principle at work? (And remember, Proverbs are inspired observations, not promises.)
- If it is **OT Law**, do you see a relationship between this particular law and the Ten Commandments as described in the NT, or the Great Commandment (to love God and neighbor)? If it is part of the Jewish ceremonial law, does it illustrate some aspect of the atoning work of Jesus Christ? If it is part of the Jewish civil law, is there some principle or lesson about God’s character, concern, or priorities for our lives? (Note: Most of the stranger laws seem to have been given in order to prevent identification with pagan practices of surrounding nations.)

¹ Some of this material has been adapted from Gordon Fee and Douglas Stewart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982).

² An “imprecatory” Psalm is one in which the psalmist asks God to judge, punish, or destroy his enemies (e.g., Ps 109).

- If it is **OT prophecy**, is there a relationship between the prophecy and the types of covenant blessings and curses found in Dt 28? Is it quoted in the NT? If so, with reference to what? Could it possibly be seen as fulfilled in the return of the Jews from their exile? In the work of the coming Messiah? In a yet future period?
- If from the **Revelation**, is there an explanation of symbols found elsewhere in the Revelation? Are events in the text part of a larger sequence of events? What does the text indicate about God's sovereignty over history, his coming judgment, his protection and deliverance of his people in times of distress?