

BASIC PRINCIPLES OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

BY
SCOTT CRAWFORD

INTRODUCTION

Hosea 4:6 says “**6 My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge: because thou hast rejected knowledge, I will also reject thee, that thou shalt be no priest to me: seeing thou hast forgotten the law of thy God, I will also forget thy children.**”

It is of paramount importance that we as believers in the Lord Jesus Christ avail ourselves of the precious gift of God’s Word! We must not reject knowledge as did the Israelites in Hosea’s day. Jesus said to the Sadducees in **Matthew 22:29** “**Ye do err, not knowing the scriptures, nor the power of God.**” The Sadducees were supposed to be very familiar with God’s Word, but they did not believe in the resurrection. I believe part of their problem was failing to properly interpret God’s Word! We don’t want to ever be accused by the Lord Jesus Christ of not knowing His Word nor His Power!!! In **John 15:3**, Jesus said, “**Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you.**” The Word of God is powerful and sharper than any two edged sword according to **Hebrews 4:12**. Let’s look more closely at God’s Word and determine how to be better students and avoid error.

PRESUPPOSITIONS

We begin this study with several presuppositions or assumptions. *Firstly, the Bible is the inerrant Word of God!* **2 Timothy 3:16** “**All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness:**”. The Bible is the complete revelation of God for man! It does not simply contain the Word of God; it is the Word of God! We make no apology for this assumption; and by faith, we believe the Bible is God’s Word.

Secondly, God’s Word contains immeasurable Wisdom and Knowledge! **Ephesians 1:15-19**, “**Wherefore I also, after I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus, and love unto all the saints, 16 Cease not to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers; 17 That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give unto you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him: 18 The eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that ye may know what is the hope of his calling, and what the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints, 19 And what is the exceeding greatness of his power to usward who believe, according to the working of his mighty power,**”. Verse 15 indicates Paul knew of the faith and love which characterized the Ephesian believers. He was praying that they would fully understand all that God had for them. God’s Word is abounding with treasures for us to mine. Notice that faith and love influenced Paul’s prayer for the Ephesians. Without this combination, it is impossible to increase in knowledge from God’s Word. Our prayer should be that God would reveal His glory to us through His Word.

Thirdly, the Word of God is sufficient to address all of our situations and needs! **Psalm 119** is replete with instruction for all walks of life. Almost every verse references dependence upon God’s Word for instruction and deliverance. All of God’s Word is able to help us with decisions that we must make in this life and for the life beyond.

Fourthly, God has commanded us to read and study His Word! 1 Timothy 4:13 says “Till I come, give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine.” John 5:39 says “Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me.” There is no doubt that God wants us to read, study, and search His Word! Jesus is the Word; and if we want to be more like Jesus, we must know more of His Word.

Fifthly, to study takes work and skill! Notice 2 Timothy 2:15, “Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.” For the child of God, this life is a life of work. This verse refers to us as workmen that don’t need to be ashamed. When we stand before our judge, the Lord Jesus Christ, at the Judgment Seat of Christ, we don’t need to be ashamed. We should seek the approval of God by studying God’s Word diligently and allowing it to transform our lives. **Colossians 3:16** says, **“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.”** We must apply ourselves to God’s Word like never before. Notice Moses’ admonition in **Psalms 90:12** **“So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.”** We need to organize our lives so that we make time for the regular study of God’s marvelous gift, His Word! The remainder of this lesson will focus on some principles we should use when we approach God’s precious Word.

MAJOR BIBLE THEMES

It is important that we recognize the major lines of truth that run throughout scripture. I want to bring your attention to 3 major truths. I am indebted to Dr. John Phillips’ book, *Bible Explorer’s Guide*, for some of the material in this lesson. He identifies the following themes in the introduction of that book.

Salvation Truths: God’s means of salvation from the everlasting penalty of sin is by grace through faith (**Eph 2:8-9**), plus nothing minus nothing. The doctrine of grace is something we all must accept by faith and for which we never cease to praise the living Savior! When Adam fell, God promised to crush the head of the serpent through the seed of the woman. Adam and everyone after him - up until the time of Christ - were saved by grace through faith if they believed in God’s promise. They looked forward to the cross and subsequent resurrection; we look backward. We both look at the same thing, just from a different perspective. We must fully understand that salvation is a work of God and God alone. Our salvation rests in the finished work of our resurrected Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Church Truths: The Church was only revealed in the New Testament. Promises to Israel do not apply to the Church. Israel and the Church are both God’s people, but there are specific promises that relate to each as separate entities. The Church is made up of *individual* Jews and Gentiles while Israel is made up of the descendants of Jacob. **Romans chapter 11** elaborates upon God’s intentions for Israel as a nation. **Ephesians chapters 2 and 3** discuss how God has made both individual Jew and Gentile part of the same body, the one new man in Christ. It should be recognized that God has chosen the nation of Israel to be His earthly people and has promised them earthly or material blessing. He has chosen the Church to be His heavenly people and promised them heavenly or spiritual blessings. It is extremely important to make the distinction between Israel and the Church.

Kingdom Truths: God has always intended to establish a literal Kingdom on earth. God set Adam over this earth to have dominion. When Adam fell he forfeited the right to rule over the kingdom of this earth. Hence, the Lord Jesus Christ, the last Adam, the second man (**1 Cor 15:45-47**) came to bring redemption and restore the kingdom as God originally intended. The majority of the prophecy in the Old Testament and New Testament points to the Kingdom of the Messiah. His Kingdom will be one of righteousness and will be the central point in human history. I don't think it would be incorrect to say that the theme of the entire Bible is the Kingdom of the Messiah! The Godman, the Lord Jesus Christ, will rule in righteousness, in a theocracy. His first coming was one of suffering and shame; His second coming will be one of joy and exaltation. He is worthy of all praise, glory, and honor! Thus, understanding the second coming of Christ and his literal Kingdom on earth is paramount to understanding scripture.

All three of these themes must be distinguished when reading scripture. Mixing these major themes produces confusion. They must be understood contextually.

HERMENEUTICS

Hermeneutics is simply the science of interpretation. When we approach the scriptures, we use a literal method of interpretation. If it makes plain sense, seek not other sense! This method of interpretation or hermeneutics leads to a specific type of theology called Dispensational Theology. Dispensational Theology focuses on the glory of God! In Dispensational Theology, we see periods of time during which man is tested by God with respect to obedience. In each dispensation, man fails to be obedient. There are basically 7 dispensations or administrations or stewardships identified in scripture. We will examine a few.

The dispensation of law began with Moses and ended with Christ. The law of Moses was given to Israel, not for salvation, but for instruction on how to please and fellowship with God. It is important to realize that God gave the Mosaic Law only to Israel, not to Gentiles.

The dispensation of the church is characterized by grace. We are currently living in this dispensation. God is showing His grace to all mankind by offering them salvation from the penalty of sin. All men who believe are made a part of the body of Christ.

The dispensation of the Kingdom will last for 1000 years and will be a theocracy. It will be the golden age for the earth. The Lord Jesus Christ will rule and reign, with his obedient saints - Old and New Testament - with a rod of iron. Righteousness will prevail on earth. The former ruler, Satan, will be dethroned; and Christ will take his rightful place as ruler over the kingdom of earth.

It is important that we see these distinctions in God's Word. Much confusion arises by trying to spiritualize the church and kingdom dispensation. Covenant theology does this and does not see a difference between Israel and the Church. Thus, Covenant Theology uses a different hermeneutic or science of interpretation than does Dispensational Theology.

One other hermeneutic prevalent today is that of *experience*. Charismatics and many other denominations depend upon a theology of experience to explain and guide their beliefs. They use the Word to a certain extent, but rely heavily upon experiences or feelings to

guide them. We must be careful to avoid allowing feelings to dictate what we believe. Certainly, we are emotional beings, but our emotions should never override the revealed will of God in scripture.

Let's talk more about the science of interpretation. The concept of science brings with it the application of certain rules. When we talk about interpreting scripture, certain rules apply - the rules of language. Some terms we will explore to help delineate the rules of language include meaning, exegesis, genre, and context. *Meaning* is simply the author's intent. God says what He means and means what He says. *Exegesis* is drawing out of the meaning. What did the author mean is the aim for the process of exegesis. *Genre* is a French word that means a type or classification. In our application, it is a classification of Biblical literature. Knowing the type of literature is very important to interpretation. *Context* deals with parts that determine meaning.

BASIC PARTS TO HERMENEUTICAL ANALYSIS

We will look at three ways that help us interpret scripture. When we analyze a passage, we look at it *grammatically*. We study words and how they relate to each other (syntax, singular, plural, etc.). It is of utmost importance that we pay attention to the rules of language and interpret scripture accordingly. For example, notice **Galatians 3:16**, "**Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ.**" The distinction of "seed" versus "seeds" is vital.

Next, we analyze scripture from a *historical perspective*. This approach is outside the context and apart from the text. We may consider cultures, wars, customs, and also geography. For example, when we study a Jewish wedding, we must understand the differences between weddings in our day and weddings thousands of years ago. Jewish weddings emanate from an oriental culture which is much different than our western culture.

We also look at scripture from a *literary perspective*. The type or classification (genre) of a book or passage tells us a great deal about what that author is saying. For a modern example of genre think about how you read and interpret a classified ad as opposed to how you read a novel or how you understand what is being said in a comic strip as opposed to the business section. All these are different types or classifications of literature. We understand them all, but we have to recognize they say things differently. We take them literally when we know they should be taken literally. We read between the lines when we know to read between the lines.

CONTEXT

Context is the all important word in interpretation! When we come to a passage of scripture, we should be very observant. Who is speaking? To whom is he/she speaking? Why is he/she speaking? What was just said a few verses ago? What verses are being referenced? These are a few examples of observations we should employ when we are trying to determine context. Context essentially has three levels: Immediate, Middle, and Distant.

Immediate Context looks at words, grammar, and syntax. When we look at immediate context, we want to look closely at what is said and how it functions in the sentence.

Immediate context can apply to a few words, sentences, paragraphs, chapters, and even books.

Middle or Literary Context is concerned with the genre or type of literature. Is the passage a Psalm, Proverb, Narrative, or Prophecy? Many scholars feel this level of context is the most important to interpretation. I don't know that I feel it is the most important, but I feel it is very important. Many problems arise when we fail to realize the type of literature we are reading. For instance, let's examine **2 Samuel 22:7-17**. **“In my distress I called upon the LORD, and cried to my God: and he did hear my voice out of his temple, and my cry did enter into his ears. 8 Then the earth shook and trembled; the foundations of heaven moved and shook, because he was wroth. 9 There went up a smoke out of his nostrils, and fire out of his mouth devoured: coals were kindled by it. 10 He bowed the heavens also, and came down; and darkness was under his feet. 11 And he rode upon a cherub, and did fly: and he was seen upon the wings of the wind. 12 And he made darkness pavilions round about him, dark waters, and thick clouds of the skies. 13 Through the brightness before him were coals of fire kindled. 14 The LORD thundered from heaven, and the most High uttered his voice. 15 And he sent out arrows, and scattered them; lightning, and discomfited them. 16 And the channels of the sea appeared, the foundations of the world were discovered, at the rebuking of the LORD, at the blast of the breath of his nostrils. 17 He sent from above, he took me; he drew me out of many waters;”**. Verse 9 says smoke came out of his nostrils. Verse 11 says he rode upon a cherub and the wings of the wind. Does the wind have wings? Verse 15 says he sent out arrows. What kind of arrows? Verse 17 says someone was drawn out of many waters. How do we interpret this? Did all of these things actually literally take place? Here, we must understand the type of literature. David is speaking and describing God's deliverance in a Psalm. You can see this same passage in Psalm 18. A psalm is poetry, and poetry is written to be very vivid and descriptive. Figures of speech are used to describe the marvelous grace of God and his mighty deliverance of David. As you read your Bible, make sure you take some time to understand the type of literature you are reading. Not recognizing the genre of a book can lead to false doctrines and cults. From the example above it is easy to see how someone can make the Bible say anything they want it to say by failing to recognize its genre.

Distant Context is sometimes referred to as *Theological Context*. It looks at the Bible message as a whole. Doctrine should not be based entirely on one passage of scripture. Scripture provides its own commentary many times. Recognition of this level of context helps us understand how to deal with seemingly obscure passages. For example, we know that salvation by grace through faith is a gift of God and not won or lost based on works. When we come across a passage that seems to be in opposition to this truth or Theological Context, we should step back and dig further into the passage to determine what it is saying. If we can't figure it out, it does not mean there is a contradiction. It means we have not understood the passage.

AN EXAMPLE OF CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Let's look at **1 Timothy 6:11-12, 17-19**. **“But thou, O man of God, flee these things; and follow after righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, meekness. 12 Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, whereunto thou art also called, and hast professed a good profession before many witnesses. 17 Charge them that are rich in this world, that they be not highminded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy; 18 That they do good, that they be**

rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to communicate; 19 Laying up in store for themselves a good foundation against the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life.”

We are going to examine this passage from all three levels of context. Let’s start with the *middle or literary context*. This is an epistle or formal letter from Paul. Paul is writing this letter to Timothy, a young preacher. He is giving him instruction concerning ministry and how he should conduct his life as a minister.

The *immediate context* is detailed. Paul is speaking to Timothy, a believer. He is telling him in v. 11 to flee some things mentioned in prior verses and to follow godly things. He is telling him to fight the good fight in v. 12. He also tells this believer, this preacher, to “lay hold on eternal life”. What does it mean to lay hold on eternal life? I thought Timothy was a believer who already possessed eternal life? Look at verse 17. He is telling Timothy to charge those in his congregation that are rich in this world to not be proud. He tells them in v. 18 to do good and abound in good works. In verse 19 the continuation of that thought is that they also may “lay hold on eternal life”. What does that mean?

At this point we should employ our knowledge of *distant or theological context*. We know that eternal salvation from the penalty of sin is a gift that we can not work to attain. It is a sovereign act of God Almighty! We simply trust Him to give it to us.

So then, how do we explain what seems to be a contradiction? I think it is important to ask a question. Does this passage actually say you work for salvation? No, it does not. Many times we see a word and associate a specific meaning to that word not recognizing that a word has several meanings depending upon context. We should also recognize that eternal life is not a synonym for salvation or justification. In some contexts, eternal life is a benefit of salvation/justification. In this instance, this can not be the case. Paul is clearly talking about works that a saved person should perform. Our knowledge of scripture should alert us to the fact that God rewards those who perform righteous acts. Another major Bible theme, not mentioned earlier, is that of reward or recompense for God’s people. Scripture in many places indicates that God will reward the saints for righteous works. Notice what Jesus says in **Matthew 6:20 “But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal:”**. In this passage, Jesus is addressing His disciples and admonishing them to lay up treasures in heaven, which speaks of reward in heaven, not going to heaven. I think we can see some parallel thought in “lay up” and “lay hold”. I think the same parallel can be seen in Paul’s second letter to Timothy in the 4th chapter and verses 7 & 8. In this passage, Paul declares he has fought a good fight, and he will be rewarded for his labor. Thus, I believe a proper interpretation of “lay hold on eternal life” speaks of a **quality** of eternal life. Hence, reward for good works; not good works to earn salvation.

SUMMARY

God’s Word is truly a gift to mankind! He has, in mercy, allowed us the ability to understand some of His very attributes and thoughts. When we approach scripture, we should be cognizant of the principles outlined in this lesson. We should approach the study of scripture as a “workman”, realizing our very life depends upon the Word of God. He has spoken and thus we have life. May we reverently and diligently “apply our hearts to wisdom”, not the wisdom of this world, but the wisdom found in the Word of God.