HOW TO DO BIBLE INTERPRETATION!

MAKING THE BIBLE COME ALIVE
FOR YOURSELF AND YOUR PEOPLE

LARRY W. CALDWELL

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To the thousands of students over the past thirty years with whom I've had the privilege of helping to make the Bible come alive: God bless you as you continue to make disciples of all the people groups of the world!

Preface

It is not an easy task to write a book on Bible Interpretation. I have had the opportunity, and privilege, of teaching courses on Bible interpretation for many years. I have done this at the college, seminary, and doctoral levels. I have also lead discussion groups on the subject in various church Sunday Schools and other friendly gatherings. Each time I have learned a great deal from my students and fellow believers. I have also gained deeper understandings, many of which I have put into this book. What you will find in this book is the result of thirty years of working with the Bible and with the people whom I have taught. This book has been made much stronger by these activities. I am grateful for all who have influenced me over the years. Thank you!

I would also like to acknowledge a few individuals (some now in glory) who taught me how to interpret the Bible better. I must begin with some of my Sunday School teachers at Central Baptist Church in Sioux Falls, SD, among them: Mr. Hansen, Mrs. Frost, Dr. Tieszen, Mr. Pickard, Dr. Kiner,

and Mr. and Mrs. Schmidt. Special recognition here goes to my eighth grade Sunday School teacher, Mrs. Lillian Veenker. She first challenged me to go on a deeper journey with the Bible. She had no worries about the many questions and issues this rather lively teenager raised. Next, to my Bethel College and Seminary Bible teachers: Drs. Arthur Lewis, Robert Stein, John Piper, Al Glenn, Robert Guelich, John Sailhamer, Bill Bellinger, Donald Madvig and especially, Berkeley Mickelsen. All of them made me dig ever more deeply into the biblical text. Finally, to my Fuller Seminary graduate school professors: Drs. Dean Gilliland, Paul Hiebert, Dan Shaw, Arthur Glasser, and especially Charles Kraft. All of whom gave me a concern for exegeting (interpreting) *both* the biblical text and the culture of those who will be receiving that text. To all these teachers, my heartfelt gratitude!

And, lastly, to my wife, Mary, who has been on this journey with me for almost forty years now. Thanks for making "home" wherever we happened to find ourselves around the world!

A Personal Note
Why I Wrote This Book

The purpose of this book is to help you learn a simple approach to interpreting the Bible. The method that I explain here comes directly from my own experience. For over thirty years now, I have trained people to understand the Bible for themselves and their people. These people were from both western and non-western backgrounds. Many were missionaries in training. They were preparing to take the Bible to non-western peoples in cross-cultural settings. Many were ordinary people in churches. They just wanted to learn how to interpret the Bible for themselves. Some of the people were in prison. They wanted to take the truths of the Bible to those who were also in prison. Others were students in Bible colleges and seminaries. They were studying the Bible in-depth for the first time in their lives.

Early on in my teaching career, I learned some important things. I learned that I had received excellent Bible training in my college and seminary years. My teachers trained me to depend upon lots of books in

addition to the Bible. I did learn how to interpret the Bible better. But, at the same time, I also learned how to use lots of other books. I learned to use books like Hebrew and Greek grammars and dictionaries, commentaries, and other helpful aids. These books taught me more about the Bible. But there was a problem. It took me years of intense study before I believed that I was ready to interpret the Bible. My teachers seemed to think that too. During those years, I also collected a large library of expensive books. I then used these books to help me to interpret the Bible better.

As God would have it, one of my first major teaching assignments led my wife, Mary, and I to a small Bible college. The college was located on the northern tip of the island of Cebu in the Philippines. Here, on a university site in the middle of sugar cane fields, I learned two valuable lessons. These lessons have influenced my Bible teaching to this day. First, I discovered that my Bible interpretation training was very little help to my Filipino students. These pastors and church workers-in-training had access to very few books other than the Bible. Not only did they not have these books, but they also could not afford them. They cost too much money. It wasn't that I—or my Filipino students—were against using other resources besides the Bible. It was just that those books were not available to them except in the school library. So how could I—Bible teacher who depended on my books—teach my Filipino students? How to interpret the Bible by using *only* the Bible?

I am afraid that I did not do a very good job of it with my first group of Filipino students! However, that early teaching experience led me on a journey that continues to this day. How can we best train Christians to interpret the Bible by just using the Bible itself, without using outside resources? Again, it is not that I am against using outside resources. My goal is simply this. I want to teach Christians to interpret the Bible for themselves *first*. Then they can use outside resources to interpret the Bible for them after that. It is far too easy to depend on the resources that talk about the Bible than on the Bible itself.

So, the simple approach that you will learn in this book is based upon the Bible *only*. We will not use any resources outside of the Bible. I truly believe that God made His Word so that anyone who wants to can understand it. That is why we will learn how to do Bible interpretation using only the Bible. Using the Bible alone was the first lesson I learned during that first year in the Philippines.

The second lesson was this. I had received training that had prepared me to interpret the Bible *for an American audience*. But now my audience was no longer Americans. They were Filipinos! I soon realized that the

life issues that Filipinos faced were not the same life issues that Americans faced. This obvious fact led me on still another life-long search. How can we best interpret the Bible for people who live in different cultural contexts and social situations from our own? In my Bible training, I had learned a lot about how to interpret the Bible. However, I had learned very little about how to understand the culture of the people that I was going to teach. To use technical language, I had learned how to exegete (interpret) the Bible, but not how to exegete (interpret) my own culture or social group. How, then, could I exegete (interpret) a culture or social group that was much different from my own. When I realized this, I began to take further graduate studies in anthropology (the study of the human race) and contextualization. Soon I was helping to develop an entirely new area of academic study known as "ethnohermeneutics." (Do you want to find out more about ethnohermeneutics? Read some of my articles. You will find them in links in the "About the Author" page at the end of this book.)

So, this book I will give you simple steps simple to help you interpret the Bible better. It will also give you steps to understand your culture or social group better. This approach is something that you will not find in most books on Bible interpretation. But I believe that it is very important that we learn how to bring the results of our Bible interpretation to the people to whom we minister. We must know how to do this, whether they are people from our own culture or social group, or people of another culture entirely. Either way, learning how to interpret our own culture is an important part of a thorough approach to Bible interpretation.

So then, now you know why I have written this book. I hope that it will help equip new generations of Bible interpreters. Then they will be better able to bring the truths of the Bible to their own people group. Also, they will be able to teach people groups all over the world. Pastors, missionaries, church and parachurch workers, and "regular" believers in Jesus—all will benefit from what I teach in this book.

So how should we use this book? Part 1 begins by giving some basic foundations when doing any study of the Bible. That is followed by what I call the Seven Steps for Doing Good Bible Interpretation. You will want to read through all of Part 1 carefully first in order to understand what I am doing later on in Part 2. Part 2 then looks at how to interpret a specific literary form found in the Bible. How do we interpret passages like a law passage or a parable? You can carefully read through Part 2 as well. But my advice is to quickly read through all of Part 2 and then go back to a particular chapter. Then carefully reread what I written about a specific literary form that matches what you are studying in the Bible. As you continue to

study the Bible, I urge you to come back to Part 2 from time to time. Then read a specific chapter again to become more confident as you interpret literary form.

Some of you may want to study even more in-depth. For you, I have included at the end of each chapter. I call them, "Questions to Think About." These questions will help you to think about on the material covered in the chapter. At the end of each chapter, there is also a section entitled "Making the Bible *Come Alive*!" The questions found there will help you practice what you have learned in the chapter. I encourage you to answer all of the questions! They will help you to *do* Bible interpretation. These questions can be very helpful for those who are using the book as part of a college or seminary course on Bible Interpretation.

Thank you for joining me on this exciting journey of *doing* Bible interpretation. God bless as you attempt to make the Bible *come alive* for yourself and your people!

Your fellow Bible interpreter,
Larry W. Caldwell
Easter, 2016

Introduction
Why We Study the Bible

I am glad that you want to understand God's Word better! Your desire is a good one. It is important for anyone who wants to be a follower of Jesus to understand God's word, the Bible. The apostle Paul was one of the main writers of the New Testament. He thought that it was very important for every Christian to understand God's word. Paul emphasized this when he wrote the following words to his young pastor friend Timothy:

> 'Do your best to present yourself to God as someone He approves of. Be a worker who has no need to be ashamed. Be someone who deals with the word of truth in the right way' (2 Tim. 2:15).

These words to Timothy apply to all who would be followers of Jesus even today. This book on *Doing* Bible Interpretation will give you the tools to "deal rightly" with God's Word. Many of you who are reading this book

are leaders of a Bible study or small group. I have written this book so that you—and your entire group—will be better able to deal rightly with God's Word.

What is the best way to "deal rightly" with the Bible? In order to understand God's Word we need to interpret it. To interpret something is simply to explain it, or to tell its meaning. It can also mean to present it in ways that people can understand. To "deal rightly" with the Bible, then, is to explain it in ways that people can understand. This is what Bible interpretation is all about.

The apostle Paul said something else about God's Word. That is important to understand before we begin a study on Bible interpretation. Again, in his words to Timothy, Paul said this:

> 'All Scripture is breathed out by God. It is useful for teaching and for telling us when we do wrong. It also corrects us, and trains us how to live in the right way. It does this so that the man (or woman or child) of God may be complete, equipped ready for every good work' (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

We need to understand several points about these two verses:

1. "All Scripture" means exactly what it says: all of the Bible. This means both the Old Testament and New Testament, including everything in them. Whether it is family histories, or laws, or proverbs, or stories, or worship songs—all of Scripture is important for us.

2. All of this Scripture is "breathed out by God," or as some translations say, "God-breathed." God was closely involved in the very making of His Word, the Bible. You are very close to somebody if you can actually feel their breath when they breathe on you. This is how close God was to the making of the Bible. This shows us that the Bible is important to God. So it needs to be important to us as well.

3. All of this Scripture is "profitable," or as some translations say, "useful." God's Word is useful. We are not to try to understand it simply to understand it. Rather, we need to understand the Bible so that it will be useful to us. It will be useful "for teaching and for telling us when we do wrong. It also corrects us and trains us to live in the right way." We attempt to understand the Bible so that it will be useful in our lives. It will make us more like Jesus. We can also help the Bible to be useful in the lives of others whom God brings us in contact with.

4. All of this Scripture is useful in our lives. This is "that the man [or woman or child] of God may be complete, equipped ready for every good work." Do you want to be more like Jesus? Then you will want to understand the Bible better. The Bible will help you to "be complete" and to be "equipped" for every good work." There is no better "good work" to be "equipped" for as a Christian than to help others to be better Christians.

That is good news. God wants you to be fully prepared in your Christian life. Also God wants you to understand His Word better. This is so you can better help others to understand the Bible. Then they, in turn, might become better followers of Jesus. This is what doing Bible interpretation is all about.

In Part 1 of this book we will learn some of the basic foundations and steps. These will tell us how to do good Bible interpretation. In Part 2 we will put these principles to work as we actively do Bible interpretation together. So let us get started!

PART ONE

BASIC FOUNDATIONS AND THE SEVEN STEPS FOR HOW TO DO BIBLE INTERPRETATION

CHAPTER 1

Basic Foundations
For *Doing* Bible Interpretation

This book on Bible interpretation assumes many basic points in regards to God's Word. In my opinion, you cannot do any proper Bible interpretation unless you understand these basic foundations. Let us look at each one in turn.

ONE The Bible Has Authority

Underneath everything that follows in this book is this: the Bible has authority as the Word of God. It guides all Christians in everything that we believe and everything that we do. To say it has authority means the Bible is completely accurate and reliable. It comes from an authority who is God Himself. This book accepts the authority of the Bible as fact and will not attempt to prove it here. As we have already seen, the Bible is "breathed out by God" (2 Tim. 3:16). This gives us a good idea of its authority for our lives and for the lives of our Christian brothers and sisters.

It is also important to see that only the Bible has such authority. We can learn many good things about God from other books and other people outside of the Bible. But it is only the Bible that has authority. The writer of the last book of the New Testament, the book of Revelation, makes this very clear:

> 'I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book. If anyone adds to them, God will add to him the punishments which this book describes. If anyone takes away from the words of this prophecy, this is what will happen. God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which this book describes' (Rev.22:18-19).

The writer of the book of Revelation is speaking about his own book. But the truth of his words is relevant as well to those other writings in the Old and New Testaments. The book of Jude in the New Testament, says that the giving of truth which has authority ended in New Testament times. Jude speaks to his readers "to fight for the faith that God *once for all* delivered to the saints" (Jude 3).

As a result, everything that we need to know is already found in the Bible. The Bible *alone* is our final authority.

TWO God Communicates His Truth To Us Through the Bible

We have already seen this in the Introduction. "All Scripture...is useful for teaching and for telling us when we do wrong. It also corrects us, and trains us to live in the right way." (2 Tim. 3:16). Thus, God has revealed everything we need to know about Him—what is "profitable" or "useful"— in the Bible. These "profitable" things are His Truth that He wants to make known to each one of us. God communicates His Truth to us through the Bible.

God not only wants to communicate His Truth through His Word, He wants *every Christian* to understand His Word. This is why learning how to interpret the Bible better is so important. God's Word is not difficult to understand. God went to all the trouble of being closely involved in the process of the making of His Word. It was "breathed out by God" (2 Tim. 3:16). He did not want to make His Word difficult to understand.

Thus, you who are followers of Jesus *have two important responsibilities:*

1. To interpret and understand the Bible better *for yourself*; and

2. To help *other Christians* interpret the Bible better for themselves.

This book will help you to succeed at both of these responsibilities.

THREE Jesus Is the Center of the Bible

The very first sentences found in the book of Hebrews in the New Testament are important for us as we interpret the Bible:

> 'Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets. But in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son. He appointed him to be the owner of all things. Through Jesus also he created the world' (Heb. 1:1-2).

These verses show us that in Old Testament times God spoke to His people through prophets. But in New Testament times God spoke to His people in a final way through His Son, Jesus Christ. In a very real way the Old Testament prepares for Jesus. The New Testament gives a clearer understanding of who Jesus is. As a result, Jesus can really be said to be the center of the Bible. As we interpret both the Old and New Testaments we will need to see our interpretations through Jesus. This does not mean that everything in the Old Testament points directly to Jesus. However, we must always be aware of the possibility that the Old Testament text may be pointing, directly or indirectly, to Jesus.

FOUR The Holy Spirit Guides Bible Interpretation

The Bible is God's Word of authority to us today. So it is good to know that we are not alone when we attempt to understand the Bible. We have a helper. He is the Holy Spirit who has promised "to guide you into all the truth" (John 16:13). The apostle Paul makes this clear in his letter to the Christians in the city of Corinth:

> 'Now we have not received the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God. So we can understand the things which God has freely given us. And we teach this in words which human wisdom does not teach. Instead the Spirit teaches us. He interprets spiritual truths to those who are spiritual' (1 Cor. 2:12-13).

Paul's words here show us that the Holy Spirit is with us to lead us and guide us. He will do this as we interpret the Bible. We do not interpret it all by ourselves.

This is very important to understand right from the very beginning of a book on Bible interpretation. As we realize the truth that the Bible is a "breathed out by God" book, we also realize something else. The same actively breathing God has given us His Holy Spirit to guide our understanding of what His Truth is for us.

Often books on Bible interpretation teach a lot of human-made rules and instructions. They mostly forget about the work of the Holy Spirit in Bible interpretation. In this book we will learn a few human-made rules and instructions. But at the same time we will also remember that:

The Holy Spirit must always guide
our interpretations of the Bible

Bible interpretation is *both* a Spirit-lead and human-lead process. Both parts of the process are important as we do Bible interpretation. To emphasize the one without the other is to do injustice to God. He gave us the Holy Spirit, as well as our human minds. So we can use both to help us better interpret the Bible.

FIVE Bible Interpretation Is Best Done in Community

We should not do Bible interpretation alone, in isolation from other believers. It is not a private study. We can learn much about the Bible in our own private prayers and study. But it is particularly *in community with other believers* that good Bible interpretation occurs. We need a local community of believers—in Bible studies and in small group gatherings—to help us.

The writer of the book of Proverbs in the Old Testament speaks of the need to learn from one another. He says: "Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another" (Prov. 27:17). Nowhere is this truer than when it comes to Bible interpretation. We need each other to help us gain a greater understanding of Bible texts. We do this as we listen to others who the Holy Spirit also guides.

We see this in at least two places in the book of Acts in the New Testament. The early church, at its very beginning, was a community of believers who did things together:

> 'And they followed the apostles teaching and fellowship (close friendship)' (Acts 2:42).

Later on in the book of Acts, the writer talks about a group of Jews who lived in the city of Berea. They listened to Paul's words about Jesus. They studied the Scriptures together to better understand the truth of what Paul was saying:

> 'Now these Jews...received the word with all eagerness. They examined the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so' (Acts 17:11).

The example of these Bereans is a good one for all of us who would study God's Word. Bible interpretation is best done with a community of believers. They are all listening to the Holy Spirit and examining the Bible together. They do this in order to discover God's will for their lives, both as individuals and as a group.

SIX Bible Interpretation Is Living and Active

Some of the Bible interpretation that people do in the Church today is done for its own sake. It does not necessarily serve the Church. Such Bible interpretation is often boring. It dulls the senses of those who listen.

This is not the way it should be. Bible interpretation is lively! It is active! In the book of Hebrews in the New Testament the writer makes this clear when he says:

> 'For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword...' (Heb. 4:12).

The writer of Hebrews here says that the Bible is 'living and active.' It is not dead and lazy. In fact, it is so living and active that it can cut us if we are not careful! ('sharper than any two-edged sword'). As a result, this 'living and active' Bible has practical relevance for us as we live our lives today.

I have given this book the title "*Doing* Bible Interpretation" for a good reason. Bible interpretation should be powerful! Bible interpretation should be lively! This kind of *active* Bible interpretation gives those of us who are Bible interpreters a motive. We want to study in detail this Bible that is both 'God-breathed' and 'useful.' How exciting!

That is why in this book you will be *actively* learning how to better interpret God's Word. We do not do this just by reading about how to interpret the Bible. We do it by actively interpreting it. That is why part of the title of all of the following chapters in Part 1 is 'Making the Bible Come *Alive!*' Also, at the end of all of the chapters—from Chapter 2 onwards—you will have the opportunity to 'make the Bible come alive.' You will be able to make relevant immediately what you have just read.

Interpreting the Bible is one of the most exciting things that followers of Jesus get to do. What a privilege!

SEVEN The Chief Purpose of Bible Interpretation Is To Make Disciples

Some Bible interpreters are more concerned about bringing glory to themselves through their interpretations of the Bible. They do this rather than bringing glory to Jesus. I hope that you will not be like this, dear readers. Always remember this:

We do good Bible interpretation
not for its own sake, but to serve.

My hope for all of you who read this book is this. I hope that you will better learn to "rightly deal" with God's Word for one main purpose only:

So that you will be better equipped
to evangelize and disciple others.

This purpose directly links with what Jesus, at the very end of His ministry on earth, commanded *all* His followers to do:

> 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations. Baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Teach them to obey all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age' (Matt. 28:19-20).

We are ordered here by Jesus to "make disciples" and to teach them "to obey all that I have commanded you."

As a result, at its center:

- Bible interpretation *is missions*;
- Bible interpretation helps us *make disciples*.

May this book help you become better equipped to make disciples among all the nations and people groups of our world!

Conclusion

The center of good Bible interpretation is this. We realize that God's Word is a special group of writings which have authority. The Holy Spirit helps it to guide Christians today in what they ought to believe and do. The Bible is God's Truth to us today. Though there may be some truth found in other religious writings, the Bible is only God's Truth. Both the Old and New Testaments point to Jesus and only Jesus is "the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14:6).

With the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we seek to actively interpret the Bible in community with other believers. As a result we will indeed be better able to understand God's Word for our own lives. We will also understand it for the lives of our families, churches and communities. As a result, we will be better able to make disciples of all the nations and peoples. There is no greater privilege for any of us than that.

Questions To Think About

1. God was closely involved in the making of the Bible ("breathed out by God"). How does this give you confidence as you attempt to communicate the truths of the Bible to others?

2. What two practical steps will you need to make in your Bible study to allow the Holy Spirit to be more important?

3. The Bible says, "iron sharpens iron." As a follower of Jesus how will you find other Christians to study the Bible with?

4. The purpose of Bible interpretation is to make disciples. How does this make you feel as you attempt to study the Bible more?

CHAPTER 2

Making the Bible *Come Alive!* Steps 1 and 2

Introduction

You desire a good thing: to interpret the Bible the best that you can. I have written this book on *Doing* Bible Interpretation to help you do just that. But as we have already said in Chapter 1, this book also seeks to help make the Bible *come alive*. This is for your own lives. It is for the lives of the people whom God has brought you in contact with. This is what good Bible interpretation is all about. It is making the Bible come alive for ourselves and for those with whom we interpret it. This will happen in our Bible studies and small groups—your community of believers.

That's why I have called the next few chapters 'Making the Bible *Come Alive!*' Do you want your Bible interpretation to come alive? I certainly hope so! To make this happen a good interpreter, whenever studying a Bible passage, will ask the following seven questions. I call these questions: "Seven Steps To Make the Bible *Come Alive!*":

STEP ONE	What kind of literature is this Bible passage and what are the effects of this?
STEP TWO	Where does the context of this Bible passage begin and end?
STEP THREE	What was God saying through this Bible passage to the original audience then?
STEP FOUR	What is the general principle that God intended through this Bible passage for all people and all cultures?
STEP FIVE	What is God saying through this Bible passage to you today?
STEP SIX	What is God saying through this Bible passage to your community of believers today?
STEP SEVEN	How will you communicate the truths of this Bible passage to your community of believers?

Here in Chapter 2 we will study Steps 1-2. In Chapters 3 to 7 we will study Steps 3 to 7.

So let us get started!

Step One to Make the Bible *Come Alive!*

What kind of literature is this Bible passage and what are the effects of this?

The first question to ask when trying to understand a passage of Scripture is simple. What type or form of literature is the passage? Knowing the type of literature of a passage affects that passage's interpretation. This is because you cannot interpret all types of literature in the same way.

So what do I mean by the phrase "type of literature"? Let us look at a practical example. Reading an electric bill is very different from reading a love letter from your husband/wife or boyfriend/girlfriend. They both are forms of communication. But you "read" or interpret an electric bill in a different way than you "read" or interpret a love letter. When you read an electric bill you look for important words like "kilowatt hours used" and "total bill". When you read a love letter you look for important words like

"my darling," "I love you". In other words, you use different mental categories when you attempt to understand these two very different forms of communication.

All literature forms are like this. They all have certain ways that you read them. So, for example, we interpret the various Old Testament laws differently than when we interpret the parables of Jesus. Both law and parables are special literature forms. So they have different literature 'rules' that we use to interpret them. The same is true for all the different literature forms that are found in the Bible.

The Bible contains many different literature forms. In this book we will examine what I consider to be the eight most important. These eight are:

1. Story or Narrative
2. Law
3. Poetry, especially Psalms and Proverbs
4. Prophecy
5. Sayings of Jesus
6. Parables of Jesus
7. Letters or Epistles
8. Apocalyptic, especially the book of Revelation

We will examine each of these eight literature forms in more detail in Part 2. For now let us move on to Step 2.

Step Two to Make the Bible Come Alive!

Where does the context of this Bible passage begin and end?

Before we talk about where the context of a Bible passage begins and ends we must first ask: Just what do I mean by the word "context"? Context refers to the situation in which something exists or happens. Let us look at a few examples that illustrate the importance of context.

Look at the capital letters in the phrase found on the following page. What words do you see?

GODISNOWHERE

Some of you will see the words GOD IS NOW HERE. Others of you will see the words GOD IS NO WHERE. Whose interpretation is correct? The

only way to answer this question is to attempt to understand this phrase in its original context. And since we cannot find the original context, we cannot make definite conclusions about whose interpretation is correct.

This is why it is not wise to take a verse completely out of its context. If there is no context in which to understand the verse there is only an incomplete understanding of that verse's meaning. So in simple words it means:

No Context = Incomplete Understanding

Let us look at another example. The five words below were found in the headline of a newspaper. What does this headline mean?

Car Accident Kills Drunk Teen

There are at least two possibilities to this headline's meaning. It could mean that a teenager who had too much to drink was wandering in the streets. A passing car then hit and killed him. Or, this headline could mean this. A drunk teenager was driving a car, got into an accident, and was killed. Again, which interpretation is correct? We will never know by reading the headline alone. The *only way* that we will know is if we read the rest of the article. It is in the article where we will find more of the facts and details surrounding the event. Only with more information from the article will we then be able to understand what the headline is saying. Usually the more context we have, the more understanding we will also have:

More Context = More Understanding

When I use the word, "context," I am referring to the words, phrases or sentences that surround a particular Bible passage. These help give understanding to that passage. Properly understanding the Bible context also includes what I call 'deciding where the context begins and ends'. When we first attempt to understand a particular Bible passage we want to find out where that passage begins and ends. Sometimes our Bible interpretations will be different depending on where we put the context.

Another thing to remember is this. People added all the chapter, verse, and paragraph divisions and the section headings in most of our Bibles to-

day much later. They were added *after* the Bible was written. They are not a part of the original text of the Bible. As a result, we need to decide where the context begins and ends. It must be where it really exists in the text. We do not set it where a later editor added these extra-biblical divisions and section headings.

Let us look at two examples of why deciding where the context begins and ends is so important in Bible interpretation.

Two Examples of Step 2

Example #1: Psalm 50:10
This verse reads:

> 'For every beast of the forest is mine,
> the cattle on a thousand hills.'

People often interpret Psalm 50:10 out of context with no regard to where the context begins and ends. Taking the verse out of context leads many Christians to interpret the verse something like the following:

> What God is saying to me in this verse is this: He owns everything in the world, even the cattle on a thousand hills. As a result, what this verse is saying is that God wants to bless all Christians with physical blessings, especially me. Since God owns so many cattle, He can certainly spare just one cow for my own needs.

Seen in the absence of its entire context, many consider Psalm 50:10 to be a verse of blessing. God wants to bless us with physical goods since He owns everything in the first place.

However, when this verse is seen in the *entire context* of Psalm 50—we get a completely different understanding. In the context of the entire Psalm 50 what God is saying is more like this:

1. He is calling His faithful ones to Him (verses 1-6).

2. He is speaking against them (verse 7). He reminds them that he does not need their sacrifices and offerings (verses 8 and 9).

3. He is not the kind of a God that is hungry and needs to eat (verses 12-13). Rather 'every beast of the forest' is His, as are 'the cattle on a thousand hills. (verse 10). In fact He knows "all the birds of the hills" and "all that moves in the field" are His (verse 11).

4. He will deliver those who "offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving" and who call upon Him "in the day of trouble" (verses 14-15). They will see "the salvation of God" (verse 23).

5. But the wicked unfaithful ones have no right to offer sacrifices. They will be rebuked and torn apart "and there will be none to deliver" them (verses 16-22).

By looking at the context of Psalm 50 we see that verse 10 is not a verse *about physical blessings*. Rather it is a verse found in the total context *of obedience or judgment*. God owns everything in the world and does not need anything from humans. He is calling His faithful ones to offer true sacrifices of thanksgiving in obedience to His laws. When they do this they will be blessed. As a result,

Psalm 50 is about obedience not blessing!

We should not look at verse 10 of Psalm 50 by itself, without giving attention to where the context begins and ends. If we do, it will give us an incomplete understanding of what God is saying in this verse. If we look at the verse in the total context of Psalm 50, we get a much clearer understanding about what God is saying.

Example #2: Revelation 3:20

This verse reads:

> 'Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.'

People often interpret Revelation 3:20 out of context. Why? It is because the interpreter fails to decide where the context begins and ends.

So how do we usually interpret this verse? Often we use this verse when we present the Gospel as we seek to evangelize. We say something like this to the non-Christian when using Revelation 3:20: "Jesus is standing at the door of your heart and is knocking. All you have to do is to open the door of your heart. Jesus will come in, and you can be born again." But I do not think this a correct understanding of what Jesus is saying when we think of the context of Revelation chapter 3. Here is why:

1. In the total context of chapters 1 to 3, John, the writer is addressing his words "to the seven churches that are in Asia" (Rev. 1:4).

2. For most of the churches there are words of encouragement but also words of judgment. John tells the seven churches to "hear what the Spirit says to the churches." He also tells them to "conquer" the real difficulties that the believers of these churches are having.

3. In this context comes Revelation 3:20, in the immediate context of John's word to the church in Laodicea (Rev. 3:14-23). Here the Laodicean believers are described as being "neither cold nor hot" (Rev. 3:15). Because they are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, "I will spit you out of my mouth" (Rev. 3:16).

4. But there is hope for these Laodicean believers. "Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline. So be zealous and repent" (Rev. 3:19). If these believers do repent, they can have fellowship (close friendship) with God restored once again. This will be as close as the closeness of table fellowship (eating a meal together with others).

5. Jesus is standing at the door and knocking. The *believer* just has to hear His voice and open the door. Then Jesus will come in to the repentant believer and eat with him.

As a result, is Revelation 3:20 a verse *for unbelievers* or *for believers*? If we take it only by itself, out of context we have an incomplete understanding. The verse seems to be for unbelievers. Jesus is knocking at their hearts. They just have to hear and open their hearts to Him, and thus be saved. However, in the fuller context of the entire passage, verse 3:20 looks much different. In its context it is definitely not a verse *for unbelievers*. *It's* a verse *for believers* who are at present out of fellowship with Jesus. Let me repeat that:

Revelation 3:20 is written for believers, not unbelievers!

There is great hope for these believers. They can repent and hear Jesus just as if He is knocking at the door of their house. They just have to open that door and they can have fellowship with Him. This is as if they are eating together around the table in their house.

Remember: more context equals more understanding. Certainly we can use Revelation 3:20 as an evangelistic verse. But that is not how John originally used the verse. He originally used it to encourage believers who had gone away from their faith to repent. Then they could restore their fellowship with Jesus once again. The opening of the door, and the resulting

table fellowship, are powerful pictures of restored relationship. We miss this when we take the verse out of context.

Conclusion

So it is with much of our understanding of the Bible. Many of us have favorite Bible verses. That is a good thing. However, by not checking the context we *may* be taking many of these favorite Bible verses *out of context*. When we do this, at the very least, we may have *an incomplete understanding* of what God is trying to say to us. When we do this, at the very worse, we may have a *mistaken understanding* of that God is trying to say in the passage.

You should by now have a good idea of what is meant by the type of literature a Bible passage belongs to. You should also know as well the importance of context and where it begins and ends when interpreting the Bible. These are Steps 1 and 2 of the "Seven Steps To Make the Bible *Come Alive!*" In the next chapter we will look at Step 3.

Questions To Think About

1. Think of two reasons why the type of literature form of a Bible passage might affect how you would interpret that passage?

2. Why is it important to remember where the context begins and ends when interpreting the Bible?

3. How have you interpreted Psalm 50:10 in the past? How will seeing the verse in its total context give you more understanding of how to interpret the verse?

4. Have you ever used Revelation 3:20 when you were evangelizing someone with the Gospel? How might you use the verse in its fuller context to help some of your fellow believers? Some of them may have gone away from their faith.

Making the Bible Come Alive!

1. What is your favorite Bible verse?

2. How do you understand or interpret that favorite Bible verse? In other words, what does that verse mean to you?

3. Now read your favorite Bible verse in its total context.

4. Decide where the context for your favorite Bible verse begins and ends.

5. How may your previous understanding or interpretation of your favorite Bible verse need to change because of that verse's total context?

CHAPTER 3

Making the Bible *Come Alive!* Step 3

Introduction

In the last chapter I introduced you to the "Seven Steps To Make the Bible *Come Alive!*" We looked at Steps 1 and 2 in more detail:

STEP ONE What kind of literature is this Bible passage and what are the effects of this?

STEP TWO Where does the context of this Bible passage begin and end?

Here in this chapter we will look in more detail at Step 3:

STEP THREE What was God saying through this Bible passage to the original audience then?

Let us start!

Step 3 to Make the Bible *Come Alive!*

What was God saying through this Bible passage to the original audience in the past?

Here is a fact. The Bible was not *originally* written for us, for me or for you. This statement may be a surprise to you. But it is true. Most of the Bible was written *first* for a specific people in a specific context in a specific time in history. For example, King David wrote many of the Old Testament psalms over 3,000 years ago. These psalms meant something to David and the Jewish people living in Israel at that time. In fact, many of these psalms were their worship songs. This was long before we read David's psalms in the book we know today as The Psalms.

It is the same for the New Testament. The words of the apostle Paul to the church in Corinth, for example, were actual letters. Paul wrote them to the Corinthian Christians in the middle of the first century AD. Paul wrote these letters to a specific church that had some very specific problems that Paul tried to answer. We read these letters today in what we know as the First or Second Letter of Paul to the Corinthians. But he first wrote them over 2,000 years ago.

The truth is this. People wrote the Bible for others living in contexts different from most of our own contexts today. This truth is important because it is essential to good Bible interpretation.

That's why Step 3 is so important. We need to know what God was saying through this Bible passage to the original audience. To answer this question the Bible interpreter looks at the passage in the form of its literature. He or she needs to know where the context begins and ends and its place in history. The interpreter does these things to try to find out what the Bible passage first meant to its original listeners. He or she does this as best as possible.

One of my favorite Bible interpretation teachers used to say something like this:

Let the text speak for itself, first!

I will explain this simply. In Step 3 the interpreter tries to understand what the Bible passage meant *then*. Here the Bible interpreter attempts to answer the following question:

What message did the original speaker/writer want to communicate to his original hearers/readers?

Now is the time to pray and ask for the Holy Spirit for help. The Bible interpreter must pray. He/she must ask God to reveal His Truth that He intended the original author and his audience to learn. Such a prayer may go something like this:

God, through the power of your Holy Spirit, please help me understand what you intended in this passage for the original author and his audience.

So after prayer what do we do? In the last chapter, in Step 2, we talked about the importance of context and where the context begins and ends. Let us look again at the two examples that we already looked at in Chapter 2. Our aim is to get some more understanding into how to answer Step 3.

Two Examples of Step 3

Example #1: Psalm 50:10
Again, this verse reads:

> 'For every beast of the forest is mine,
> the cattle on a thousand hills.'

As we discussed earlier, the context of this passage shows that verse 10 is not a verse about physical blessings. Rather it is a verse found in the context of obedience or judgment. God owns everything in the world and does not need anything from humans. He is calling His faithful ones to offer true sacrifices of thanksgiving in obedience to His laws. When they do this God will bless them.

So what was God saying through this Bible passage to the original audience?

Specific answers to this question are sometimes difficult to find. We do not know the authors of many of the Psalms. Even knowing where the context begins and ends in the Psalm itself may not help us. However, at times we do have some evidences. Often we can find these in the title that comes before the Psalm. For example in Psalm 49 the title says, "To the

choirmaster. A psalm of the sons of Korah." In Psalm 3: "A psalm of David, when he fled from Absalom his son." We can compare the historical names ("sons of Korah") or historical events ("when David fled from Absalom his son") with other Scriptures. When we find passages mentioning these individuals or events we get a fuller understanding of the original context of the Psalm.

Psalm 50 has one of these evidences. The title reads: "A psalm of Asaph." So who was Asaph? We discover that from other Scripture passages that talk about Asaph. He belonged to the family of Levi (1 Chron. 6:43). He was among the men whom David put in charge of the service of song. This happened in the house of the LORD after the ark rested there. They led the worship with song in the tent of meeting. This happened until Solomon built the house of the LORD in Jerusalem (1 Chron. 6:31-32).

We can learn more of Asaph in 1 Chronicles 15:17; 16:5, 7; 25:2; and 2 Chronicles 29:30. However, there is enough information in the above quote to see that Asaph wrote Psalm 50 during the time of David. This was before the temple was built. This is the historical context of the original hearers of this psalm. They were the Israelites who were under the rule of one of their greatest kings, David.

Asaph reminded the Israelites of their greatness in the time of David and how God blessed them. But they still had to depend on God. God still owns everything in the world and does not need anything from humans. He is calling His faithful ones in Israel to offer true sacrifices of thanksgiving in obedience to His laws. When they do this He will bless them.

In this way, we learn more about what God was saying through Psalm 50 to the original audience of Israelites back in David's time.

Example #2: Revelation 3:20

Once again, this verse reads:

> 'Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.'

So what was God saying through this Bible passage to the original audience?

In this Revelation passage we can easily discover who the original audience is and what God is saying to them. Where the context of this Revelation 3:20 passage begins and ends directly relates to John's word to the church in Laodicea (Rev. 3:14-23). Here the Laodicean believers were not very enthusiastic ("neither hot nor cold.") But God gives them hope. If

they repent they can have fellowship (close friendship) with God restored once again. This can be even as close as when people share a meal together.

In many cases, like this Revelation 3:20 passage, it is not difficult to discover what God was saying. He was speaking through the Bible passage to the original audience. We often find the meaning within the context of the passage itself.

Conclusion

God wants us to understand His Word, the Bible. Sometimes, though, we think that the writer only wrote it for us. We forget that he wrote it for somebody else first. We should look for what a particular Bible passage meant when people spoke or wrote it originally. Then we are attempting to let the text speak for itself first. Sometimes it is easy to understand what the text meant to its original audience. Sometimes it takes a little more effort. Either way, to understand what God was saying to the original audience then is an important step towards doing good Bible interpretation.

You should by now have a good idea of how to look for what God was saying to the original author and his audience. This is Step 3 of the "Seven Steps To Make the Bible *Come Alive*!" In the next chapter we will look at Step 4.

Questions To Think About

1. How did you feel when you read that the Bible was not originally written for you?

2. What does the sentence, "Let the text speak for itself, first" mean to you? Write it down in your own words.

3. Why is it important to understand first what God was saying to the original author and his original audience?

Making the Bible Come Alive!

1. Remember your favorite Bible verse from the last chapter? Read it again in its context, paying attention to where the context begins and ends.

2. Pray and ask God to reveal to you what He was saying in your favorite Bible verse to the original author and his audience.

3. Using the context of your favorite Bible verse, what was God saying to the original author and his audience?

CHAPTER 4

Making the Bible *Come Alive!* Step 4

Introduction

So far we have looked at steps 1 to 3 of the "Seven Steps To Make the Bible *Come Alive!*" We need to do these first three steps at the beginning of any study of a Bible verse or passage. Let us look at Steps 1 to 3 once again:

STEP ONE	What kind of literature is this Bible passage and what are the effects of this?
STEP TWO	Where does the context of this Bible passage begin and end?
STEP THREE	What was God saying through this Bible passage to the original audience then?

However, if we stop at Step 3 we are only going half way in our Bible interpretation. There are more Steps that will fulfill our Bible interpretation task.

Here in this chapter we will look in more detail at Step 4:

STEP FOUR What is the general principle that God intended through this Bible passage for all people and all cultures?

Let us start!

Step 4 to Make the Bible Come Alive!

What is the general principle that God thought about through this Bible passage for all people and all cultures?

Two problems sometimes face Bible interpreters. The first problem is this: *the original context is very different from our context today.* Sometimes we understand what a particular Bible passage meant to the original speaker/writer and his original audience. But then we realize that their original situation and culture is very different from our own. So the Bible passage just does not seem to be relevant at all to our situation and culture today.

The second problem is this: *the original context is unknown to us.* Sometimes, though more rarely, it is difficult to understand what a particular Bible passage meant. This would apply to either the original speaker/writer or to his original audience. We just do not have enough information about the original context to come to definite conclusions.

There are many possible answers to these two problems. But before seeking answers this is the time to pray and ask the Holy Spirit for help. The Bible interpreter must pray and ask God to reveal His Truth that He intended to give to everyone through the passage. Such a prayer may go something like this:

God, through the power of your Holy Spirit, please help me understand what you intended in this passage for all people and all cultures.

So, after we pray and seek the Holy Spirit's guidance, what do we do with these two problems? Let us look first at Problem #1.

Problem #1:

The Original Context Is Very Different from Our Context Today

We must always remember that even though a human author spoke or wrote the words found in the Bible, God is behind it all. *He is the Divine Author.* The Bible was "breathed out by God" (2 Tim. 3:16).Thus God had a reason to be closely involved with the very heart and mind of the human speaker or writer. God knew that because of this closeness, His words would be relevant to the people in their original context. But, being the Divine Author, He *also knew* that His words would be relevant as well *for all people and all cultures.* This would apply even for people like us. We are people who are living 2,000, 3,000 or even 4,000 years after people wrote or spoke the original words of the Bible. Certainly God wants every generation every creature and every person to understand His book!

As a result, it is worth working with the question. What did God have in mind in this passage for every person in every culture? I call this looking for the *general principle* of the passage. In other words:

What is the general principle of the Bible passage? that the Divine Author, God, intended for every person in every culture?

We must remember that "all Scripture is profitable" (2 Tim. 3:16). This means that *every* Bible passage has a general principle that applies to *every person* in *every culture*. All too often we neglect large parts of the Bible by saying something like this:

- "Well, I just do not understand what the original context is. So the passage must not be relevant for me and my people in our culture today,"
  or
- "Well I understand the original context. But the passage is just not relevant for me and my people in our culture today."

By looking for the *general principle* of each passage, we are saying this. *Every Bible passage* relates to every person in every culture today. It is this general principle that we can both preach and teach to our community of believers.

This does not mean that there is only one general principle for all time

and all cultures. That would be too limiting of God. We would be too bold to think that we alone could find the one general principle for everybody. But with the help of the Holy Spirit we can discover, *in general terms,* what God is saying to all people and cultures. That is why I am using the phrase "in general" here. While there may be some different understandings or opinions, *in general*:

We can understand what the Divine Author intended for everybody.

If we know the original context, this can help us to know the general principle. How? If we know the original context, it helps us to find out the possibilities of the general principle. The diagram in Figure 1, found on the next page, shows this connection between original context and general principle. Let us study it in more detail.

The diagram shows that God, as the Divine Author, gave the information that He wanted to communicate to the original speaker/writer. He or she in turn gave that information to his/her original audience in either spoken or written form. It is helpful to know the original context of the first hearer/readers. Then we should better understand the general principle that God intends "for all people and all cultures." The arrow in the following diagram shows how the original context and the general principle are closely linked together.

Take a good look at the diagram in Figure 1. See how the connection between "then" and "for all people and all cultures" works out.

Let us see how this general principle works by looking at the two passages we have already examined: Psalm 50:10 and Revelation 3:20.

Two Examples of Step 4

Example #1: Psalm 50:10
Again, this verse reads:

> 'For every beast of the forest is mine,
> the cattle on a thousand hills.'

We discussed this in the last chapter. In Psalm 50 Asaph is reminding the Israelites of the greatness of Israel in the time of David. God blessed them, but they were still dependent upon God. God still owns everything in the world and does not need anything from humans. He is calling His faithful ones in Israel to offer true sacrifices of thanksgiving in obedience to His laws. When they do this God will bless them.

So what is the general principle for all people and all cultures? The best way to explain general principles is to use one simple and short sentence. So the general principle found in Psalm 50:10 goes something like this:

God owns everything and does not need anything from humans except for our obedience.

This general principle comes right out of the original context of Psalm 50:10 and God intended it for everyone.

Example #2: Revelation 3:20

Once again, this verse reads:

> 'Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.'

We discussed Revelation 3:20 in our last chapter. We said that God would give hope to the Laodicean believers who were not enthusiastic about their faith. If they repented from their attitude God would restore their relationship. This would be as close as people are when they share a meal together.

So what is the general principle for all people and all cultures? Once again, we can best explain general principles using one simple and short sentence. So the general principle in Revelation 3:20 goes something like this:

Fellowship with God can be restored for Christians who repent.

Again, this general principle comes directly out of the original context of Revelation 3:20. God intended it for everyone.

Problem #2:

The Original Context Is Unknown to Us

So what do we do if we cannot understand what the passage originally meant to the original audience? As I mentioned earlier, these are fairly

rare occurrences in the Bible. However, the solution to answering the question is this. Look again for the general principle that God, the Divine Author, intended everyone to understand.

Good examples of an unknown original context are the creation accounts found in Genesis chapters 1 and 2. To whom were these accounts written? How did their original audience understand them? Did Moses record these accounts for the people of Israel? If yes, then the original context would be this. Moses is showing the Israelites that the God of creation is very different from the gods of the Egyptian people. He is also very different from the other gods of the land of Canaan. But there is no evidence in the text of Genesis itself that Moses was the author.

We must always *let the text speak for itself, first*. So it is most likely that Moses is the author of these creation accounts. But we just do not know for certain. The fact that we do not know with certainty does not mean that they are not intended for us today. Since the Bible is the Word of God which has authority, these creation accounts still have a meaning in general terms to us today.

So what is the general principle of Genesis chapters 1 and 2? It is this:

There is a God and He is the Creator of all things, including humankind.

The general principle behind these creation accounts is this. There is good evidence for all peoples and all cultures of Who God is, that is, the Creator God.

Conclusion

As we said before, God wants us to understand His Word. Sometimes the specific details may be unknown. Still God intended the passage to have a general principle that everyone can understand. Many think that if we cannot understand a particular Bible passage it is all right if we simply ignore it. Then we do not think it is important for our lives today. But to do good Bible interpretation means that we take the entire Bible seriously. As followers of Jesus we must take the time and effort necessary to understand what *all* of God's Word means for us.

You should by now know how to look for the general principle of a passage for all peoples and all cultures. This is Step 4 in the "Seven Steps To Make the Bible *Come Alive!*" In the next chapter we will look at Step 5.

Questions To Think About

1. Have you ever avoided reading parts of the Bible because you did not understand them? Why?
2. In your own words, describe the phrase: "God as Divine Author."
3. Do you really think that all of the passages found in the Bible have a general meaning for all people and cultures today?
4. Why do you think that prayer is so important when you are trying to find the general meaning of a passage?

Making the Bible *Come Alive!*

1. Remember your favorite Bible verse from the last chapters? Read it again in its context. Give attention to where the context begins and ends. Also give attention to what God was saying to the original author and his original audience.
2. Ask God to reveal to you the general principle in your favorite Bible verse that He intended for all people and cultures.
3. What is the general principle of your favorite passage?

CHAPTER 5

Making the Bible *Come Alive!* Step 5

Introduction

So far we have looked at steps 1 to 4 of the "Seven Steps To Make the Bible *Come Alive!*" Let us look at them once again before we move on:

STEP ONE	What kind of literature is this Bible passage and what are the effects of this?
STEP TWO	Where does the context of this Bible passage begin and end?
STEP THREE	What was God saying through this Bible passage to the original audience then?
STEP FOUR	What is the general principle that God intended through this Bible passage for all people and all cultures?

Here in Chapter 5 we will look in more detail at Step 5:

STEP FIVE What is God saying through this Bible passage to you today?

Let us do it!

Step 5 to Make the Bible Come Alive!

What is God saying through this Bible passage to you today?

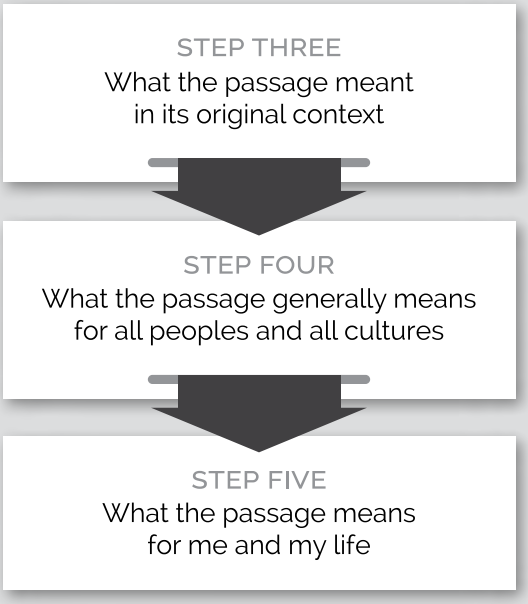
The center of all Bible interpretation *is personal*. If the Bible interpretation that you do does not affect and change your own life, then it is incomplete. Remember that "all Scripture...is useful for teaching and for telling us when we do wrong. It corrects us and trains us in the right way." The truth of this passage from 2 Timothy 3:16 applies to the Bible interpreter *first*. Any Bible passage should teach *us*, tell *us* when we do wrong correct *us*, or train *us* in the right way. But it will also show us how it will also be profitable for the lives of the people whom God brings us in contact with. But what is true for others should *first* be true for us as well.

Here, once again, we must stress the importance of praying and seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We are reading God's Word in an attempt to understand what it means for our own life. This is a difficult job. It is very serious. As a result, we really do need to pray to the Holy Spirit to give us wisdom and understanding. Such a prayer may go something like this:

God, through the power of your Holy Spirit,
please help me understand what you intend
for me and my life through this passage.

So after we pray and seek the Holy Spirit's guidance, what do we do next? We look carefully at the work that we have already done in Steps 3 and 4. We will usually easily see from our previous work in Steps 3 and 4 what it means for us today. We can see the relationship between Steps 3, 4 and 5 in the diagram in Figure 2 found on the next page.

Figure 2



Let's see how Step 5 works by looking back at the two previous passages that we have already worked on: Psalm 50:10 and Revelation 3:20.

Two Examples of Step 5

Example #1: Psalm 50:10
Again, this verse reads:

> 'For every beast of the forest is mine,
> the cattle on a thousand hills.'

Let us look at this verse with the help of Steps 3 to 5.

STEP THREE

What the passage meant in its original context:

In Psalm 50 Asaph is reminding the Israelites of the greatness of Israel in the time of David. God blessed them then, but they are

still dependent upon Him. God still owns everything in the world and does not need anything from humans. He is calling His faithful ones in Israel to offer true sacrifices of thanksgiving in obedience to His laws. When they do that, God will bless them.

STEP FOUR

What the passage generally means for all people and all cultures:

God owns everything and does not need anything from humans except for our obedience.

STEP FIVE

What the passage means for me and my life:

Again, Step 5 comes directly out of Steps 3 and 4. However, we are all individuals living in different cultural contexts. So our individual relationships with God will be different. As a result, the specific answers that we each give to this question will be different. These individual specific answers, however, still need to come out of Steps 3 and 4. They cannot stand by themselves without any connection to these two steps.

So, how does this passage affect me, especially as an American living in the United States? In several ways:

- God owns everything and does not need anything from me. I need to realize the privilege that it is to serve Him and to do so with humility.
- Since God wants my obedience, I must honestly ask myself these questions. In what ways am I truly being obedient to Him? In what ways am I being disobedient?
- As an American I already own almost everything I need. But I really need to reject suggestions that I do not need anything from God.

But many of you who are reading this book are *not* Americans. Each of you, therefore, will need to work out Step 5 for your own life and situation. The first two bullet points above may apply to you as well. The third bullet point may be a subject limited to American or Western people.

Example #2: Revelation 3:20

Once again, this verse reads:

> 'Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.'

Again, let us look at this verse with the help of Steps 3 to 5.

STEP THREE

What the passage meant in its original context:

In Revelation 3:20 the Laodicean believers were not enthusiastic about their faith. The letter gives them hope. If they repent, God will restore their relationship. It will be as close as when people share a meal together.

STEP FOUR

What the passage generally means for all people and all cultures:

God can restore relations for Christians who repent.

STEP FIVE

What the passage means for me and my life:

Again, Step 5 comes directly out of Steps 3 and 4. Our answers to Step 5 will likely be a bit different for each one of us. However, these different answers still need to come out of Steps 3 and 4. They cannot stand by themselves without any connection to these two steps.

So, how does this passage affect me? In several ways:

- Jesus can restore my relationship with Him once again no matter how I feel. This is on condition that I repent.
- Jesus is always there. It is I who have to respond. I have to "open the door."
- Closeness with Jesus is a wonderful thing, like sharing a meal is.

Once again, each of you will need to work out Step 5 for your own life and situation. In the case of Revelation 3:20, however, our individual Step 5s may not be very different from one another.

In summary to all the above, here is a real truth:

Only until we understand what the passage means for our own life are we then able to go on to Step 6.

Conclusion

God not only wants us to understand His Word, He wants us to apply it to our own lives. We must take this important Step 5 *first*. If we do not, we will never be real to the people that God has called us to serve. As followers of Jesus we must let the Bible speak to us and change our own lives first. We cannot expect the lives of others in our Bible studies or small groups to change before this.

You should by now have a good idea of how to relate a Bible passage to your own life. This is Step 5 in the "Seven Steps To Make the Bible *Come Alive!*" In the next chapter we will look at Step 6.

Questions To Think About

1. Explain in your own words the relationship between Steps 3, 4 and 5.

2. Why is prayer important when you are trying to find out what God is saying to you through the passage?

3. Why is it important to understand what a Bible passage means for your own life first? Why should you do this before you try to relate it to the lives of others in your Bible studies or small groups?

Making the Bible *Come Alive!*

1. Remember your favorite Bible verse from the last chapters? Read it again in its context. Give attention to where the context begins and ends. Also give attention to what God was saying to the original author and his original audience. Give attention as well to the general principle that He intended for all peoples and cultures.

2. Pray and ask God to reveal what He is trying to say to you through your favorite Bible verse.

3. What is God saying to you today through your favorite Bible verse?

CHAPTER 6

Making the Bible *Come Alive!* Step 6

Introduction

Up to this point we have looked at Steps 1 to 5 of the "Seven Steps To Make the Bible *Come Alive!*" Let us do a review of them once again before we move on:

STEP ONE	What kind of literature is this Bible passage and what are the effects of this?
STEP TWO	Where does the context of this Bible passage begin and end?
STEP THREE	What was God saying through this Bible passage to the original audience then?

STEP FOUR What is the general principle that God intended through this Bible passage for all people and all cultures?

STEP FIVE What is God saying through this Bible passage to you today?

Here in Chapter 6 we will look in more detail at Step 6:

STEP SIX What is God saying through this Bible passage to your local community of believers today?

Let us start!

Step 6 to Make the Bible Come Alive!

What is God saying through this Bible passage to your community of believers today?

Here in Step 6 the Bible interpreter attempts to answer this question. How can I best interpret that Bible passage for the believers in my Bible study or small group today? In Chapter 1 we talked about Bible interpretation that is best done in community with other believers. You are not learning how to interpret the Bible for yourself, alone. You are learning to interpret the Bible so that you are better equipped to help your local community of believers. You want them to understand the Bible passage better. They also need to know how to make it relevant to their daily lives.

Thus, you have a great responsibility to interpret the Bible accurately and honestly. You do so accurately by following Steps 1 to 5 that we have talked about already. You do so honestly by letting the Holy Spirit speak through His Word. Then you try to communicate what He is saying in the best way that you can in Step 6. Once again, here is where dependence on the Holy Spirit is important. You are passing on the results of your Bible interpretation to your fellow believers in your Bible study or small group. This is a serious task.

As a result, at the beginning of Step 6 the Bible interpreter may pray something like this:

God, through the power of your Holy Spirit, please help me communicate the truths of this passage that you want my community of believers to hear, understand and obey.

Here is good news! If you have done Steps 1 to 5 well it will not be difficult for you to do Step 6. That is because in Step 6 you simply make the results of Steps 3, 4 and 5 relevant to your local community of believers. You can see the relationship between Steps 3, 4, 5 and 6 in the diagram found in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3

Let us see how Step 6 works by looking back at the two previous passages that we have already worked on: Psalm 50:10 and Revelation 3:20.

Two Examples of Step 6

Example #1: Psalm 50:10
Again, this verse reads:

> 'For every beast of the forest is mine,
> the cattle on a thousand hills.'

Let us look at this verse following Steps 3 to 6.

STEP THREE

What the passage meant in its original context:

In Psalm 50 Asaph is reminding the Israelites of the greatness of Israel in the time of David. God blessed them then. But they are still dependent upon God. God still owns everything in the world and does not need anything from humans. He is calling His faithful ones in Israel to offer true sacrifices of thanksgiving in obedience to His laws. When they do this God will bless them.

STEP FOUR

What the passage generally means for all people and all cultures:

God owns everything and does not need anything from humans except for our obedience.

STEP FIVE

What the passage means for me and my life:

- God owns everything and does not need anything from me. I need to realize the privilege that it is to serve Him and to do so with humility.
- Since God wants my obedience, I must honestly ask myself two questions. In what ways am I truly being obedient to Him? In what ways am I being disobedient?

STEP SIX

What the passage means for my community of believers:

Again, Step 6 comes directly out of Steps 3, 4 and 5. However, our specific local communities of believers are living in different social and/or cultural contexts. So the specific answers that people

give to this question may be different according to that local context. These specific answers for our communities, however, still need to come out of Steps 3, 4 and 5. They cannot stand by themselves without any connection to these three steps.

So, how might this passage affect your local community of believers? This should be fairly similar to Step 5:

- God owns everything and does not need anything from us. We need to realize the privilege that it is to serve Him and to do so with humility.
- God wants our obedience as His followers. So we must honestly ask ourselves these questions. In what ways are we truly being obedient to Him? In what ways are we being disobedient?

Example #2: Revelation 3:20

Once again, this verse reads:

> 'Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him. I will eat with him, and he with me.'

Again, let us look at this verse in light of Steps 3 to 6.

STEP THREE

What the passage meant in its original context:

In Revelation 3:20 the Laodicean believers were not enthusiastic about their faith. This letter gives them hope. If they repent God will restore their relationship with him. It will be as close as when people share a meal together.

STEP FOUR

What the passage generally means for all people and all cultures:

God can restore the relationship for Christians who repent.

STEP FIVE

What the passage means for me and my life?

- God can restore my relationship with Jesus once again no matter how I feel. This is on condition that I repent.
- Jesus is always there. It is I who have to respond. I have to "open the door."

- Closeness with Jesus is a wonderful thing, like people sharing a meal together.

STEP SIX

What the passage means for my community of believers:

Again, Step 6 comes directly out of Steps 3, 4 and 5. Our answers to Step 6 will likely be a bit different for each of our communities of believers. However, these different answers still need to come out of Steps 3, 4 and 5. They cannot stand by themselves without any connection to these three steps.

So, how might this passage affect your local community of believers? This should be fairly similar to Step 5:

- God can restore our fellowship with Jesus once again, no matter how we feel. This is on condition that we repent.
- Jesus is always there. We are the ones who have to respond. We have to "open the door."
- Closeness with Jesus is wonderful. It is like sharing a meal together.

Conclusion

In summary to all of the above, here is a real truth:

Good Bible interpretation should change our own lives as well as the lives of our people.

Helping to change the lives of our people in our Bible studies and small groups is a real challenge for all of us. Sometimes such change may occur quickly. At other times change may be slower. But the truths of the Bible are for every person who says that he or she is a Christian. As a follower of Jesus you must interpret the Bible in such a way that that lives will change. That's what Step 6 is all about.

You should by now have a good idea of how to interpret a passage for your community of believers. This is Step 6 in the "Seven Steps To Make the Bible *Come Alive!*" In the next chapter we will look at Step 7.

Questions To Think About

1. Why is it important for you to interpret God's Word accurately and honestly for your community of believers?

2. Why is it so important to know the local context of the local body of believers for good Bible interpretation?

3. Explain how Steps 3-6 all fit together for understanding what the Bible passage means for your community of believers.

Making the Bible *Come Alive!*

1. Remember your favorite Bible verse from the last chapters? Read it again in its context. Give attention to where the context begins and ends. Give attention to what God was saying to the original author and his original audience. Also remember what God spoke to you concerning this passage and your own life.

2. Pray and ask God to reveal to you through your favorite verse what He wants you to communicate to your group. This is so that they will hear, understand and obey His Word.

3. What does God want you to communicate about your favorite verse to your people in your Bible study or small group?

CHAPTER 7

How to Make the Bible *Come Alive!* Step 7

Introduction

We have now looked at steps 1 to 6 of the "Seven Steps To Make the Bible *Come Alive!*" Let us look at them once again before we move on:

STEP ONE	What kind of literature is this Bible passage and what are the effects of this?
STEP TWO	Where does the context of this Bible passage begin and end?
STEP THREE	What was God saying through this Bible passage to the original audience then?
STEP FOUR	What is the general principle that God intended through this Bible passage for all people and all cultures?

STEP FIVE What is God saying through this Bible passage to you today?

STEP SIX What is God saying through this Bible passage to your local community of believers today?

Here in Chapter 7 we will look in more detail at Step 7:

STEP SEVEN How will you communicate the truths of this Bible passage to your community of believers?

Let us start!

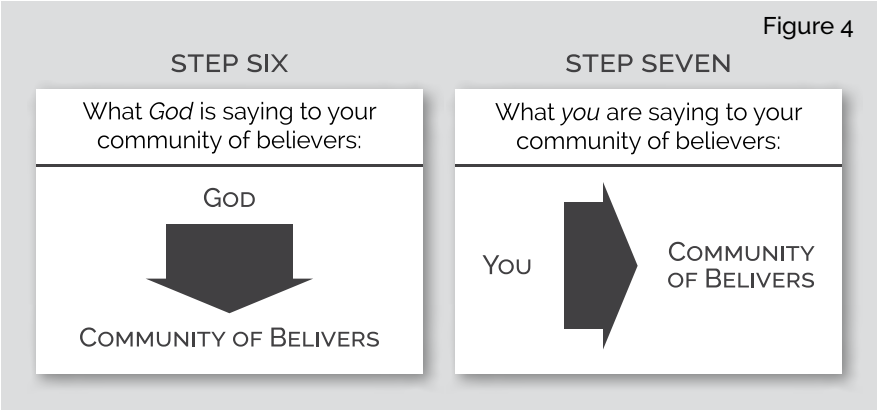
Step 7 to Make the Bible *Come Alive!*

How will you communicate the truths of this Bible passage to your community of believers?

Step 6 deals with the actual truth of the Bible passage. It also deals with what God is saying to your community of believers through that passage. The emphasis of Step 7 is different. Step 7 is where you try your best to *communicate* those truths. You are trying to pass on to others the truth of the Bible passage as clearly and relevantly as possible. You try to do it in ways they will best understand. Here is where understanding your own local people and their local context is so important.

The difference between Steps 6 and 7 can be thought of in two directions. One shows what God is saying and the other shows what you are saying. Figure 4 which is on the following page shows the differences between Steps 6 and 7.

Figure 4



Here in Step 7 the Bible interpreter attempts to answer the following two questions about the Bible passage:

- How can I best communicate the original meaning to my modern audience today?
- How can I make the original meaning relevant using modern words/terms/means/ways of understanding? In Step 7 we do Bible interpretation at the level of the interpreter and his or her people in their local context. We have already talked about the importance of the Bible context. At the same time, it is *equally important* to give attention to the local context of your local community of believers. Bible interpretation does not occur in emptiness.

Rather, Bible interpretation, if we do it correctly, is always done *in community*, with other believers. All Bible interpretation that the Holy Spirit guides should have an effect on the believing community. It should affect both individuals and the group. This Christian community is the local context.

As a result, it is important that you understand your community very well. Among some of the questions you should have answers to are these:

- Why do they believe the way they do?
- Why do they think the way they do?
- What are their basic values?
- What are those things that affect the way they think about the world?
- What kinds of ideas influence them and how they make decisions?

In connection with the actual Bible passage that people are studying here are some questions that we should asking Step 7:

1. How does your local community of believers understand some of the same concepts/ideas/ways of thinking in the particular Bible passage?

2. Have there been any recent events within your community that might help them to interpret a particular passage?

3. How will you actually communicate the truths of the Bible passage to your community? What media (film, TV show, song, drama or story, and so on) will help explain what the Bible passage is speaking about?

As you can see, there is a lot to Step 7. As a result, at the beginning of Step 7 the Bible interpreter may pray something like this:

God, through the power of your Holy Spirit, please help me to understand my local community well. Then I can best communicate the truths of this Bible passage that you want my community of believers to hear, understand and obey.

So after prayer what do we do? Let us see how Step 7 works by looking back at the two previous passages that we have already worked on. These are Psalm 50:10 and Revelation 3:20. We have already studied these passages in detail. So we will not go into as much summary detail here as we did in previous chapters. Instead we will just examine Step 7.

Two Examples of Step 7

Example #1: Psalm 50:10
Again, this verse reads:

> 'For every beast of the forest is mine,
> the cattle on a thousand hills.'

Here are some questions for you to ask yourself regarding the Psalm 50:10 passage, your community in their local context, and Step 7:

- What are their understandings of God?
- What are their understandings of God's provision for their lives?
- What is their attitude towards their possessions?
- What do they think it means to obey God?
- Are there any recent events within the local community that might give understanding into their attitude towards God and their possessions?
- What popular films might have themes that will help them to understand this?

Example #2: Revelation 3:20
Once again, this verse reads:

> 'Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him. I will eat with him, and he with me.'

Here are some questions that might be good for you to ask yourself. The questions are about Revelation 3:20, your local community of believers in their local context, and Step 7:

- What are their understandings of what relationship with God means?
- What are their understandings of how sin can break that relationship with God?
- What does closeness with God look like for them?
- How do they understand repentance?
- What do they think about taking the time to sit down and eat a meal with others?
- Are there any recent events within their local community that might help you to understand what they think of sin and broken relationships?
- What popular film might help explain how sin is involved in broken relationships and/or the possibility of restored relationships?

Most books on Bible interpretation leave out Step 7. But I argue that it is one of the most important steps in the task of doing good Bible interpretation.

The Main Points

It is time to make a short list of the main points of Chapters 2 to 7. Also, we will make a list of the "Seven Steps To Make the Bible *Come Alive!*" In a very real sense, Steps 1, 2, 3 and 4 are dealing with this:

What *did* the biblical text mean *then and there*?

In Steps 1, 2, 3 and 4 we are really just trying to discover

Reading Strategies

These will help us to *read* the Bible more intelligently in order to understand it better.

The word, "strategy," just means a plan or method. So, in Steps 1, 2, 3 and 4 we are looking for *reading* methods that will better help us understand the Bible. We are looking at how we can better *exegete or interpret the biblical text.*

In the same way, Steps 5, 6 and 7 are dealing with this:

What *does* the biblical text mean *here and now*?

In Steps 5, 6 and 7 we are really just trying to discover

Relating Strategies

These will help us to relate the Bible more intelligently to our local context in order to understand it better.

So, in Steps 5, 6, and 7 we are looking for *relating* methods that will help people understand the Bible in their local context. We are looking at how we can better *exegete or interpret our local context.*

Other ways of looking at the relationship between the "Seven Steps" and the reading and relating strategies are as follows:

Reading Strategies

STEP ONE What kind of literature form is this Bible passage and what are the effects of this?

STEP TWO Where does the context of this Bible passage begin and end?

STEP THREE What was God saying through this Bible passage to the original audience then?

STEP FOUR What is the general principle that God had in mind through this Bible passage for all people and all cultures?

Relating Strategies

STEP FIVE What is God saying through this Bible passage to you today?

STEP SIX What is God saying through this Bible passage to your community of believers today?

STEP SEVEN How will you communicate the truths of this Bible passage to your community of believers?

If we want to do good Bible interpretation we must develop *both* good reading strategies and good relating strategies. We will talk more about reading strategies and relating strategies at several points throughout the rest of this book.

Conclusion

We have certainly covered a lot of information concerning the "Seven Steps To Make the Bible *Come Alive*!" You have discovered that there is a lot more to good Bible interpretation than you might have at first thought! The good news is that once you get some practice using the "Seven Steps" you will discover this. They are not as difficult as they may have first appeared here. As a Christian, you will want to take the time necessary to become more skilled in using the "Seven Steps." So you will become more effective in your Bible interpretation.

One way of becoming more skilled in Bible interpretation is to go back to Step 1. Spend some time learning about some of the literature forms in the Bible and how to best interpret them. That is exactly what we will be doing in Part 2.

Questions To Think About

1. In your own words, describe the differences between Step 6 and Step 7.

2. Why is knowing how the people in your group think and believe about different issues so important for good Bible interpretation?

3. In your own words, describe the difference between reading strategies and relating strategies.

Making the Bible *Come Alive!*

1. Do you remember your favorite Bible verse from the last chapters? Read it again in its context. Give attention to where the context begins and ends. Give attention also to what God was saying to the original author and his original audience. Also remember what God spoke to you about this passage for your life and for the lives of your group members.

2. Ask God to help you understand your local community in your local context. Then you can communicate the truths of your favorite Bible verse in ways that they will hear, understand and obey His Word.

3. How will you communicate the truths of your favorite verse to the people in your group?

PART TWO

HOW TO DO BIBLE INTERPRETATION

CHAPTER 8

How to Interpret Story

Introduction

Everyone enjoys a good story! Did you realize that most of the Bible consists of stories? Some people have estimated that about eighty percent of the Bible is story. This means that God likes stories, too! As you seek to better interpret the Bible you will need to give attention to all the stories in the Bible. You will need to learn how to interpret them.

A story is one of many literature forms. It is also known as "narrative." Much of the Old Testament contains stories. In the New Testament, the four Gospels contain many of the stories of Jesus. The book of Acts contains many stories about the early church.

So let us look at how to interpret stories!

Things that influence the stories

Four General points about Stories

As we look at how to interpret stories, there are four general points to remember about the stories found in the Bible:

1. **Stories Honor God.** The stories attempt to honor God. The individual stories of the Bible make up the larger story of God Himself. This larger story shows us what God is like.

2. **Stories Show God In Control.** The stories show God's control over both nature and human life. God is at the end in control of everything. Both nature and human life are obedient to His will.

3. **Stories Show Important Events.** The stories usually develop from an important event in the life of the individual or the group. There are lots of historical events that the Bible does not record. The stories that we read in the Bible today are there because they were important events. They happened in the lives of the particular Bible character, Israel, Jesus, or the early church.

4. **Stories Show Good and Bad.** Stories show both the good and the bad of people. Stories do not hesitate to show the negative side of individuals, or of the nation Israel, or of the early church. Stories honestly show their characters.

So whenever we look at stories and how to interpret them it is good to remember these four general points. This is because they form the basis of most of the stories that we find in the Bible.

Looking in detail at the Stories in the Bible

Whenever we examine the stories in the Bible it is good to ask four simple questions:

1. **What** was done? (Act)

   What actually happened in the story? Here the interpreter tries to separate the major acts from the minor acts. The major acts will have the most important effects for Bible interpretation.

2. **When** and/or **where** was the act done? (Scene)

   When and/or where did the story occur? What are the actual historical events that surround the particular story? These historical events may be in the life of the individual or in the life of the group, or both. Where did the actual historical events happen?

3. **Who** did the act? (Actors)

   Who are the ones that are taking part in the story? These will include both major actors and minor actors. The major actors are usually the ones who are most important to the overall story. Even God can be a major actor in a story.

4. **Why** did the actors act the way they did? (Purpose of the Act)

   There are actually two parts to the "Why" question:

   a. Why was the act done in the first place? In other words, why did the major actors act the way they did? What was their motive or purpose for why they did what they did?
   b. Why did people remember the act? Lots of stories happened in Bible times. Why did they remember this particular story? What is it about this story that was so important that it should be remembered and given to future generations?

We should ask these four simple questions What? When? and/or Where?, Who?, and Why? Then we will have a good understanding of what the Bible story is all about. They will tell us especially, how it relates to our lives and the lives of our people.

Let us look at a story in the Old Testament and practice interpreting it. We will do this by looking at these four questions from the view of the "Seven Steps." We will do this as well as what we read in the last chapter concerning "Reading Strategies" and "Relating Strategies." Let us look at the story in 2 Samuel chapter 12, verses 1-15a.

Studying a Story: An Example from 2 Samuel 12:1-15a

I will now take you through doing the "Seven Steps" and the Reading and Relating Strategies in order as we examine 2 Samuel 12:1-15a. These verses read:

[1]‘And the Lord sent Nathan to David. He came to him and said
to him, “There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and
the other poor. [2]The rich man had very many flocks and herds,
[3]but the poor man had nothing but one little female lamb. And he
brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children. It
used to eat of his food and drink from his cup and lie in his arms.
It was like a daughter to him. [4]Now there came a traveler to the
rich man. He was unwilling to take one of his own flock or herd to
prepare for the guest who had come to him. But he took the poor
man’s lamb and prepared it for the man who had come to him.”
[5]Then David was very angry with the man. So he said to Nathan,
“As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die. [6]He
shall give the poor man four times as many lambs, because he did
this, and because he had no pity.”

[7]Nathan said to David, “You are the man! This is what the Lord,
the God of Israel says. ‘I anointed you king over Israel, and I de-
livered you out of the hand of Saul. [8]And I gave you your mas-
ter’s house and your master’s wives into your arms. I gave you
the kingdom of Israel and of Judah. And if this were too little,
I would add to you as much more. [9]Why have you despised the
word of the Lord, to do what is evil in his sight? You have struck
down Uriah the Hittite with the sword. You have taken his wife
to be your wife and have killed him with the sword of the Ammo-
nites. [10]Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your
house. This is because you have ignored me and have taken the
wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife. [11]This is what the Lord
says. ‘Behold, I will bring evil against you out of your own house.
And I will take your wives before your eyes and give them to your
neighbor. He shall lie with your wives in the sight of this sun.
[12]For you did it secretly, but I will do this thing before all Isra-
el and before the sun. ” [13]David said to Nathan, “I have sinned
against the Lord.” And Nathan said to David, “The Lord also has
put away your sin; you shall not die. [14]But because by this deed
you have utterly scorned the Lord, the child who is born to you
shall die.” [15]Then Nathan went to his house.’

Reading Strategies

STEP ONE

What kind of literature form is this Bible passage and what are the effects of this?

The literature form found in 2 Samuel 12:1-15a is story. As a result, as a story we need to look at the questions: What?, When? and/or Where?, Who?, and Why?

STEP TWO

Where does the context of this Bible passage begin and end?

It is always important to remember that there were no chapters and verses in the original Bible texts. There were also no chapter or section headings. Thus, it is important for us to work out where the context begins and ends for ourselves. We must not let what others before us have done influence us.

In the situation of this story in 2 Samuel, I have decided that the context is from verses 1-15a ("a" refers to the first half of the verse). I see this as a unit because it begins with Nathan being sent in verse 1 and Nathan returning in the first sentence of verse 15a. Nathan has completed his job in this story. That is why I believe this is the context.

However, one could suggest that the story does not end at the first part of verse 15a. This is because 15b continues on with the story of the child who died. So some would carry the story through to verse 23, still others to verse 25 and the birth of Solomon. Others would begin the story in chapter 11:1, since chapter 11 is the basis for all of what happens in chapter 12.

I argue that chapter. 11:1-27 is a story. Chapter 12:1-15a is another story. Chapter 12:15b-25 is still another story. Yes, all three stories are a part of the larger story of David and Bathsheba. However, I think that it is more helpful when we can divide up larger stories into smaller stories. Then it is easier when we try to interpret the stories for our own lives and for our community of believers.

Deciding where the context begins and ends also helps us as we attempt to answer the What?, When? and/or Where?, and Who? questions.

In the case of 2 Samuel 12:1-15a:

> **What? (Act):** God sends Nathan to tell a story to show David how wrong the sin he has committed against Uriah was.

When? and/or Where? (Scene): After David commits adultery with Bathsheba and kills Uriah her husband. Nathan challenges David in David's own house. (We can guess this is from the context of 2 Sam. 11:2—"walking on the roof of the king's house"; 2 Sam. 11:9—"Uriah slept at the door of the king's house"; and 2 Sam. 12:17—"and the elders of his house stood beside him").

Who? (Actors):
Major actors: God, Nathan, David, Bathsheba and Uriah.

Minor actors: rich man with flocks and herds, poor man with one little ewe lamb, poor man's children, the traveler, Saul, house of Israel and Judah, Ammonites, David's wives, and the child who Bathsheba bore.

Most stories will have many major and minor actors. So the first thing to do is to try to distinguish between those major and minor actors. The major ones are most important to the story. The minor actors though they are perhaps necessary to the story, are not as important.

STEP THREE

What was God saying through this Bible passage to the original audience then?

Here is where the first part of the "Why?" question is important.

***Why* was the act done in the first place?**

In 2 Samuel 12:1-15a, God acted by sending Nathan to correct David for the sin he has committed against Uriah. Here the previous work we have done with the Act question (in Step 2) helps us to understand this Why? question in Step 3. The two very often go together.

So what was God saying to the audience then?

He was saying that even kings, like David, cannot ignore God's law (in this story laws about adultery and murder).

STEP FOUR

What is the general principle that God had in mind through this Bible passage for all peoples and all cultures?

Here is where the second part of the "Why?" question is important:

> ***Why* did people remember the act?**
>
> In the situation of 2 Samuel 12:1-15a people remembered the act for this reason. It was so that no future king would think that he could ignore God's law. But even for peoples and cultures without kings this passage has effects.
>
> **What God has in mind for everyone is this:**
>
> No leader or person with power has the right to disobey laws. Nor must they rule harmfully those who have little or no power.

The Reading Strategies tell us what we can get out of the text itself through using the first four Steps. The Relating Strategies and the last three Steps for the story, and how it works out in our contexts, come next.

Relating Strategies

STEP FIVE

What is God saying through this Bible passage to you today?

> Once again, Step 5 usually comes out of Steps 3 and 4, and often will be very similar to Step 4. What God is saying to me is this:
>
> Suppose I am in a position of leadership or power, in my job or in my work. I have no right to disobey human-made or God-made laws. I must not deal harmfully with those under me who have little or no power.

STEP SIX

What is God saying through this Bible passage to your community of believers today?

> Here Steps 5 and 6 will be very similar.
>
> The same is true for believers in my church or small group whatever their position. They have no right to disobey human-made

or God-made laws. This means that they must not deal harmfully with those under them who have little or no power.

STEP SEVEN

How will you communicate the truths of this Bible passage to your community of believers?

When you try to answer this question, it might be helpful to first think about the following questions:

1. In what ways does your community of believers both hear and tell stories? Who are their storytellers?
2. Have there been any local events in your community in the past that might relate to this Bible passage? Describe these events and their effect upon the worldview of your community of believers.
3. Think about stories especially in festivals, music, dramas, ceremonies and dance that are a part of the culture of your community. Can you use them to relate the truths of this Bible passage?
4. What media from your culture (film, TV show, song, and so on) might help you communicate the truths of this Bible passage to your community of believers?

For *my* community of American believers:

My own community of believers in the United States receives a number of their stories through the local newspaper. In my local newspaper recently there was the story of my local mayor. It described his possible abuse of his power in buying certain houses and land. The methods he used were morally, if not legally, doubtful. In my community of believers we could read the local newspaper account of the mayor's actions. We could then discuss right and wrong things about the mayor's actions in relation to 2 Samuel 12:1-15a.

For *your* community of believers:

You may have similar stories in your own community context involving political people. Or many of your cultures have a traditional dance or song that may be very similar to this Bible story. If so, by all means use it! You

will want to discover in your own culture those ways that you might communicate the truths of 2 Samuel 12:1-15a.

Conclusion

Good job! You are *doing* Bible interpretation! Now you are learning how to interpret the literature form of story. The Reading Strategies of Steps 1-4 and the Relating Strategies of Steps 5-7 have shown you how to read and relate stories. You can do this both for yourself as well as for your community of believers. You will get a chance to do it yourself in the section below, "Making the Bible *Come Alive!*"

Questions To Think About

1. Why is deciding where the context begins and ends so important with the literature form of story?
2. Why is it important to distinguish between the major and minor actors in a story?
3. How does your own community of believers hear and tell stories?

Making the Bible Come Alive!

1. Read the story found in 2 Samuel 12:15b-25.
2. Do Bible interpretation on this story by studying it following the Reading Strategies of Steps 1-4 and the Relating Strategies of Steps 5-7. You will find these on the following page (as well as in Appendix A).
3. Don't forget to pray through each Step!

Reading Strategies

STEP ONE — What kind of literature form is this Bible passage and what are the effects of this?

STEP TWO — Where does the context of this Bible passage begin and end?

STEP THREE What was God saying through this Bible passage to the original audience then?

STEP FOUR What is the general principle that God had in mind through this Bible passage for all people and all cultures?

Relating Strategies

STEP FIVE What is God saying through this Bible passage to you today?

STEP SIX What is God saying through this Bible passage to your community of believers today?

STEP SEVEN How will you communicate the truths of this Bible passage to your community of believers?

CHAPTER 9

How to Interpret Law

Introduction

There are many law passages in the Old Testament, especially in the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy. Sometimes when we read these law passages it seems that most of them are not relevant to us today. They seem so old. Besides, today we have the laws of our own country. So many people think that we do not really need Old Testament laws anymore.

Because many people think like that, believers today mostly ignore the literature form of law. But as followers of Jesus you know that all Scripture is important for us today, even the law passages. So what is the answer? Here I think that Step 4 is so important. We should be looking for the general principle behind the law that God intended for all peoples and all cultures. In this chapter we will see why this is so.

So let us look at how to interpret law.

Things that influence the stories

Four General Points about Law

Before we discuss law it is important to remember four general points. These influence both how the Old Testament law was given as well as how we look at it today. These four points are as follows:

1. **Law Is Good.** Often we today think of the Old Testament law as bad or negative. We think about law like this: "Oh, those poor Israelite people, they always had to follow all those laws." In fact, quite the opposite is true! The Israelites saw law as a good thing. When God first gave it they did not see the law as a burden. Rather, they were glad to obey the law. As the Psalm writer said, it was a "delight" for them (Ps. 1:2).

2. **Law Is a Voluntary Response.** Why did the Israelites delight in the law and want to follow it? Because if they obeyed the law it was a chance for them to respond to the gracious acts of God. He had rescued them from being slaves in Egypt. As a result, they freely obeyed the law because they desired to please this God.

3. **Law Helps Us Know How To Respond.** The Israelites did not only respond to the law. They knew that the law helped them correctly respond both to God and to each other. Before Moses came to them while they were slaves in Egypt the 12 tribes knew about the true God. But they did not know very much about Him, and especially how to respond to Him. Now, however, when they had the law they knew in much greater detail how they should respond to this true God. They also knew how they should live their daily lives in response to this God. Through the law they also now knew how to respond to one another each day.

4. **Law Forms the Nation Israel.** While they were slaves in Egypt, the Hebrew people were just 12 tribes. Their family relationships and their common suffering as slaves united them. Now, that they had the law, Hebrew peoples who were loosely joined together became the nation of Israel. They had their own set of national laws.

It is always good to remember these four points whenever we look at the Old Testament law and how to interpret it.

Two Types of Law

Law is fairly easy to interpret when you remember that there are essentially *two* types of law. There are laws which are universal. There are also laws for particular situations.

Universal Law: This is a law for all times and all cultures. It is universal and is for everyone. There are no exceptions.

The 10 Commandments are examples of universal law.

It is relatively easy to interpret universal law. This is because it is relevant in the same way whether in the original context or for today.

Situation Law: A law that is for a specific situation in a specific culture. It is not universal and does not apply to everyone. It has exceptions and conditions. It depends on certain circumstances. People often translate laws about situations into English with the phrases that begin with "if" or "when" and continue with "then." These phrases may also be implied. Sometimes situation law is known as case-by-case law.

Most of the laws found in Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy are examples of situation law.

It is more difficult to interpret situation law than universal law. This is because the situations then usually are not the same situations as today. So we need to pay more attention to Step 4, the general principle of the passage for all people and cultures.

Let us look at specific examples of how to interpret both universal law and situational law. We will look first at an example of universal law.

Studying Universal Law: An Example from Exodus 20:14

I will take you through doing the "Seven Steps" and the Reading and Relating Strategies in order. I will do this as we examine the universal law found in Exodus 20:14:

> 'You shall not commit adultery.'

Reading Strategies:

STEP ONE

What kind of literature form is this Bible passage and what are the effects of this?

The literature form in Exodus 20:14 is law. It is universal law. It is for everyone in all times and all cultures.

STEP TWO

Where does the context of this Bible passage begin and end?

We find this universal law in the context of other universal laws known as the 10 Commandments. This particular law is the 7th law in this set of ten universal laws. Where the context of verse 14 begins and ends is clear.

STEP THREE

What was God saying through this Bible passage to the original audience back then?

Adultery for the Old Testament audience at the time of Exodus 20:14 was clear. God defined adultery as sexual relations outside of marriage.

STEP FOUR

What is the general principle that God had in mind through this Bible passage for all people and all cultures?

As this law is universal for everyone Steps 3 and 4 will be essentially the same. No sexual relations outside of marriage are allowed.

Different cultures, however, sometimes have different definitions or understandings of what adultery is and is not. They will also have different ideas on how to define marriage. We should understand and value these cultural differences. But at the same time they should not be more important than this Biblical universal law. The Bible is always "over" any individual cultural standard of behavior of a particular people group.

Relating Strategies:

STEP FIVE

What is God saying through this Bible passage to you today?

Once again, Step 5 usually comes out of Steps 3 and 4. Since with universal law these steps are the same, the same is true for Step 5. No sexual relations outside of marriage are allowed.

STEP SIX

What is God saying through this Bible passage to your community of believers today?

Here Steps 3, 4, 5, and 6 are very similar. No sexual relations outside of marriage are allowed.

STEP SEVEN

How will you communicate the truths of this Bible passage to your community of believers?

In order to help us answer this question, we should first think about the following questions in relationship to universal law:

1. How does your community view universal laws in their own local and national governments that affect their daily lives? Are they positive towards these universal laws, or negative?
2. Do they keep these universal laws or do they find ways to avoid or to get around them?

3. What does your community of believers think about universal laws in the Old Testament? Are the Biblical universal laws relevant to their own lives?

4. What local events connected with universal law have occurred within your community of believers in the recent past (6 months)? How might these help us to understand how the people interpret universal laws? Describe these events and their effect upon the worldview of your community of believers.

5. Can you use any stories that are part of your group's culture to relate to the truths of this Bible passage? 'Stories' could include festivals, music, dramas, ceremonies, dance, and so on.

6. What media from your culture (film, TV show, song,) might help you communicate the truths of this Bible passage to your community?

For my community of American believers:

My own community of believers in the United States receive information through television programs and some magazines. Often these relate to the law about adultery. The magazines like to write about the sexual adventures of famous people. Many of these are married. If they have sexual relations outside of marriage the media does not necessarily see this as wrong, or as adultery. In fact, the media would hesitate to call it adultery. They think it is wrong to criticize something just because you do not like it. In my culture the highest ideal is not to criticize. So while they are thinking about this, my community of believers would have to discuss our culture's moral freedom. They would do so remembering the clear universal commandment against adultery in Exodus 20:14.

For your community of believers:

You may have similar examples in your own community context involving famous people. Or many of your cultures may have a traditional dance or song that will help to show the truths of this universal law. If so, by all means use it! The point is this. You will want to discover in your own culture those ways that you might communicate the truths of the Exodus 20:14 passage.

It is now time to take you through doing the "Seven Steps" and the Reading and Relating Strategies in relation to situation law.

Studying Situation Law: An Example from Leviticus Chapters 13 and 14

In preparation for this, read Leviticus chapters 13 and 14. Once you are finished keep your Bible open to these two chapters as you study situation law.

Reading Strategies

STEP ONE

What kind of literature form is this Bible passage and what are the effects of this?

The literature form found in Leviticus 13 and 14 is law. In these two chapters we find a large section of situation law. We may have to find the general principle that God planned in this passage for all people and cultures (Step 4). We will have to do this if we do not have the same situations today.

STEP TWO

Where does the context of this Bible passage begin and end?

This section of situational law is found between chapter 12 and chapter 15. Chapter 12 deals with the situation of women after childbirth. Chapter 15 deals with the situations of those who have bodily discharges. In chapters 13 and 14 of Leviticus we find two entire chapters about laws about things that are not pure. These are things like leprosy, or serious skin diseases, and mildew.

Chapter 13 tells of impurities like skin diseases and mildew. People must correct these before they can allow individuals or their possessions back into the camp. Chapter 14 tells how to restore those who have become pure.

These two chapters go together as a unit. They are the context concerning laws relating to skin diseases and mildews.

STEP THREE

What was God saying through this Bible passage to the original audience then?

By reading chapters 13 and 14 we can quickly understand the original context. The Israelites, to whom Moses is speaking, have a problem with several different types of impurities, especially skin diseases and mildews. The Israelites need to know what to do about these impurities. They needed to know who can remain within the camp or community of Israelites (Lev. 13:46). They also needed to know how to protect that community from possible infectious diseases. They also need to know how restoration happens when people have dealt with these impurities. As a result, these laws guided Israel then whenever they found impurities like skin diseases and mildews.

STEP FOUR

What is the general principle that God had in mind through this Bible passage for all people and all cultures?

People often consider the book of Leviticus in the Old Testament as a typical case of Problem #1. We previously talked about this in Chapter 4. We understand the original context *then*. But that original context is so different *for all people in all cultures* that we cannot relate to it at all. As a result, Christians today often ignore Leviticus.

But by using Step 4 and the general principle to Leviticus we can gain a lot of guidance from this book. It will help us to live our Christian lives today. For example, what is the general principle of Leviticus chapters 13 and 14 *for all people and all cultures*? It is this:

> God has a concern for the welfare of His people, including their health and even their possessions. He wants to protect them and restore them to relationships with others.

This sentence is not so simply stated as we would like in a general principle. The sentence does, however, include most of the important parts of these two difficult chapters. Sometimes the simple and short statements regarding the general principle must contain more detail.

Relating Strategies

STEP FIVE

What is God saying through this Bible passage to you today?

In situation law Step 5 usually comes out of Step 4. This is because our situations today are so different from the original context.

Obviously our cultural context is different today. We do not have to go to a priest for physical examination. People would not normally ban us from our community because of a medical condition. Nor would they do so because we had mildew in our house. At the same time, the general principle of Leviticus still applies.

So what is God saying to me? Based on the general principle, I believe that God is saying that He has a concern for my welfare. This includes my health and my possessions. He wants to protect me and keep me in relationship with other believers.

STEP SIX

What is God saying through this Bible passage to your community of believers today?

Here Steps 4, 5, and 6 will be similar. In my context chapters 13 and 14 show us that we today in our churches need to remember this. God has a very real concern for each one of us. He wants to protect us from those things that may harm us, both as individuals and as a community of believers. It is also a powerful example of how restoration can occur for those who were harmful to the community.

STEP SEVEN

How will you communicate the truths of this Bible passage to your community of believers?

In order to answer this question, it might be helpful to first think about the following questions:

1. How does your community of believers view situation laws in their own local and national governments that affect their

daily lives? Are they positive towards these situation laws, or negative? Do they keep these situation laws or do they find ways to avoid or get around them?

2. How does your community of believers view situation laws in the Old Testament? Do they see any connection between biblical situation laws and their own daily lives today?

3. What local events—connected with situation law—have occurred within your community of believers in the recent past (6 months)? Would they give us an understanding of how they interpret situation laws? Describe these events and their effect upon the worldview of your community of believers.

4. Can you use stories that are a part of your group's culture to relate the truths of this Bible passage? Stories could include festivals, music, dramas, ceremonies, dance, and so on.

5. What media from your culture (film, TV show, song, and so on) might help you communicate the truths of this Bible passage to your community of believers?

For *my* community of American believers:

There has been an HIV/Aids problem over many years in the United States. As a result, there are strict laws and guides concerning the correct handling of blood and other bodily fluids. This shows my culture's strong desire to protect individuals from getting HIV/Aids. Many Americans today, even Christians, try not to associate with people who have HIV/Aids.

The general principle of Leviticus chapters 13 and 14 should have a big effect upon how believers should relate to each other. It would affect how believers would look upon other believers who somehow have developed HIV/Aids in their past. This could have happened in a number of ways. It could be through careless living before they became believers. Or it could be because of blood that was infected. They may have received this through blood transfusions, infected needles, and so on. These HIV/Aids-infected believers need to be careful to develop good clean habits so that they do not infect others. That of course includes other believers. At the same time these believers with HIV/Aids can still be restored to relationship with their local community of believers.

For *your* community of believers:

You may have similar problems in your own community context involving HIV/Aids. Many of your cultures may have a traditional dance or song. This may be very similar to the general principle of this situation law passage. If so, by all means use it! The point is this. You will want to discover in your own culture those ways that you might communicate the truths of the Leviticus chapters 13 and 14 passage.

Conclusion

Good job! You are *doing* Bible interpretation! Now you are learning how to interpret the literature form of law. You have followed the Reading Strategies of Steps 1-4 and the Relating Strategies of Steps 5-7. I have shown you how to read and relate both universal and situational law for yourself as well as for your community. You will get a chance to do it yourself in the section below, "Making the Bible *Come Alive!*"

Questions To Think About

1. Israel saw the law as a good thing. Why is that so important in understanding the function of the law both in Israel then and in our lives today?

2. What is the difference between universal law and situation law?

3. What does your own community of believers think about both universal and situation laws?

Making the Bible *Come Alive!*

1. Read the situational law passage found in Exodus 21:28-29.

2. Do Bible interpretation on this law by studying it following the Reading Strategies of Steps 1-4 and the Relating Strategies of Steps 5-7. You will find these in Appendix A.

3. Don't forget to pray through each Step!

CHAPTER 10

Interpreting Poetry

Introduction

When we think of poetry in the Bible we most often think about entire books that contain poetry. These include Psalms and Proverbs, or books by prophets like Obadiah and Habakkuk. However, we find poetry throughout both the Old and New Testaments in almost every book of the Bible. For example, we find poetry in the songs of Moses and Miriam when Israel was rescued from Egypt (Exodus 15). There is the prayer of Jonah when he was in the stomach of the fish (Jonah 2). There is Mary's song of praise in the Magnificat (Luke 1), or the songs of the four living creatures in heaven (Revelation 4 and 5). We also find poetry throughout books of the New Testament when Jesus and Paul, among others, quote verses from the Old Testament.

Poetry is powerful. The writer of poetry chooses particular words and phrases. These have their own way of reaching into the hearts and minds

of their readers or listeners. Poetry is also clever. It can cause the hearer to take notice suddenly because of the careful use of a word or phrase. The poetry of the Old Testament, in particular, shows how the Israelites looked at life. It shows how they interpreted the events of life: problems, experiences, beliefs, philosophies (ideas) and attitudes. It is not surprising then, that we find so much poetry throughout the Bible. So it is important to know how to interpret poetry.

So let us look at how to interpret poetry!

Background

Four Major Types of Hebrew Poetry

There are different kinds of poetry. Some poetry has a balance of rhyme between lines. This is where the last word in one line rhymes with the last word in another line, like these two sample poems:

> Roses are red,
> Violets are blue.
> Sugar is sweet
> And so are you.

> I love you in the morning.
> I love you in the noon.
> I love you in the evening,
> And underneath the moon.

Other poetry has a *balance of rhythm or thought*, where the second line is linked to the first line. This second line will agree with the thought in the first line. Or it will oppose the thought in the first line. Or it will complete the thought in the first line. Hebrew poetry, in the Old Testament, has this balance of rhythm. This balance of rhythm between first line and second line is called "parallelism."

There are several different kinds of *Hebrew parallelism*. The first line/second line combination is the simplest kind of parallelism. You can find it in many of the Psalms and Proverbs. Let us look at the four major types of Hebrew parallelism using examples from the Psalms and Proverbs.

1. **Synonymous Parallelism or *Repetition*.** Here the thought of the first line is repeated in similar ways, but with different words, in the second line. The thoughts are synonymous; in

other words, the thoughts repeat each other. With synonymous or repetition parallelism each line can stand alone. Here are two examples:

> 'The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof,
> the world and those who dwell therein...' (Psalm 24:1).

And:

> 'Hear, my son, your father's instruction,
> and forsake not your mother's teaching' (Proverbs 1:8).

In both of these examples the second line is basically repeating the same thought as the first line. It just uses different words. In the Psalms 24:1 example the "world" and the "earth" are describing the same thing. The phrase "those who dwell therein" parallels the thought of "the fullness thereof." In the Proverbs 1:8 example both lines one and two are speaking of obeying ("hear" in line one and "forsake not" in line two). They also speak of your parents ("father's" in line one and "mother's" in line two) and training ("instruction" in line one and "teaching" in line two). Each line can stand alone. The repetition emphasizes the need for obedience.

2. **Antithetic Parallelism or *Contrasting*.** Here the thought of the second line contrasts with the thought in the second line. The thoughts are different from each other; in other words, they are antithetical. An important word which the writers often used (or implied) with antithetic or contrasting parallelism is the word "but." Here are two examples:

> 'For the LORD knows the way of the righteous,
> but the way of the wicked will perish' (Psalm 1:6).

And:

> 'A soft answer turns away wrath,
> but a harsh word stirs up anger' (Proverbs 15:1).

In both of these examples the second line is contrasting what is being said in the first line. Note the use of the important word

"but" in the second lines of both examples.

3. **Synthetic Parallelism or *Completion*.** Here the thought of the first line is completed in the second line. The two lines usually cannot stand alone. They need each other for completion. Important words that writers often used (or implied) in synthetic or completion parallelism are: "for," "that," "so that," and "because." Here are two examples:

> 'And those who know your name put their trust in you,
> for you, O LORD, have not forsaken those who seek you' (Psalm 9:10).

And:

> 'The blessing of the LORD makes rich,
> and he adds no sorrow with it' (Proverbs 10:22).

In both of these examples the second line completes the first line. The first example contains the important word "for." In the second example the second line implies the word "because" and the second line cannot stand alone.

4. **Emblematic Parallelism or *Symbolic*.** Here a word picture—or emblem or symbol—in one line illustrates the thought contained in the other line. Usually the word picture is in the first line, but sometimes it is in the second line. The metaphors (or comparison words) "like" or "as" are often found (or implied) in one of the lines. Here are two examples:

> 'As a deer pants for flowing streams,
> so pants my soul for you, O God' (Psalm 42:1).

And:

> 'Iron sharpens iron,
> and one man sharpens another' (Proverbs 27:17).

In both of these examples the word picture in the first line illustrates the thought of the second line. The first example contains the important word "as." In the second example the writer implies the important word "as" in the first line. He implies the word "so" in the second line.

How to Interpret Hebrew Poetry

There are several general points to consider when we interpret Hebrew poetry, especially in Psalms and Proverbs. Let us look at each one in turn.

1. **Decide where the Context begins and ends.** As we mentioned in Step 2 of the "Seven Steps," context is especially important when attempting to interpret poetry. As we have already seen in Chapter 3, sometimes in the Psalms there will be titles before the actual text. These will help us to know who wrote it, why he wrote it, and what kind of song the poetry represents. This is also true for a few of the Proverbs as well.

2. **Identify what type of Parallelism the Poetry Is.** So far we have been describing the simplest kind of Hebrew poetry, namely two-line parallelism. However, there are many other kinds of parallelism. Sometimes they involve more than two lines. Sometimes they involve combinations of different kinds of parallelism, and so on. Look, for example, at the following proverb:

   > 'Love not sleep, lest you come to poverty,
   > open your eyes, and you will have plenty of bread'
   > (Proverbs 20:13).

   In this example of two-line parallelism the parallel phrases "open your eyes" and "Love not sleep" are synonymous (the same). They both show two similar ways of saying "stay awake." However, we can take the phrase, "you will have plenty of bread," as being antithetical to its parallel phrase "lest you come to poverty." Though the two phrases are essentially saying the same thing they are doing so antithetically. It is probably true that if you do not have poverty then you will have plenty of bread. Thus, Proverbs 20:13 has examples of both synonymous and antithetic parallelism.

   However, simple two-line parallelism is the most common form found throughout the Old Testament. You will find the four basic types of Hebrew parallelism that we have discussed quite often.

3. **Remember the Many Kinds of Poetry.** Again, we find the parallelism of Hebrew poetry is particularly in the Old Testament. The poetry we find in the New Testament does not necessarily follow this kind of parallelism. This is unless the New Testament writers are using quotations from the Old Testament.

   In addition, we must interpret different kinds of poetry differently. *Wisdom poems* (like most of the Proverbs), for example, typically concentrate on "this world." They attempt to look for ways to live life better in the present day. Wisdom poems assume that wisdom is there for those who seek after it. They also assume a universal scope: that the poem is suitable for everyone. For example, in Proverbs 1:5-6 we read:

   > 'Let the wise hear and increase in learning,
   > and the one who understands obtain guidance,
   > to understand a proverb and a saying,
   > the words of the wise and their riddles.'

   Lament poems, by contrast, usually follow a formula of six parts while also containing examples of Hebrew parallelism. Using Psalm 3, we find examples of:

   1. Address, where the writer identifies the one to whom he address his words (3:1: "O LORD").
   2. Complaint, where the writer identifies what the trouble is and why he is seeking the Lord's help (3:1-2).
   3. Trust, where the writer immediately expresses trust in God (3:3).
   4. Deliverance, where the writer pleads for God to deliver him from the trouble (3:4).
   5. Assurance, where the writer expresses the assurance that God will deliver (3:5-6).
   6. Praise, where the writer offers praise, thanking and honoring God (3:7-8).

   Many Psalms, in particular, follow different kinds of formula. This depends on how the writer constructs the Psalm. And within each Psalm you will find different types of Hebrew parallelism.

Now I will take you through doing the "Seven Steps" and the Reading and Relating Strategies as you find them in Hebrew poetry.

Studying Poetry
An Example from Proverbs 31:10-31

In preparation for this, read Proverbs 31:10-31. Once you have finished, keep your Bible open to this passage as you study Hebrew poetry.

Reading Strategies

STEP ONE

What kind of literature form is this Bible passage and what are the effects of this?

> The literature form is wisdom and thus will probably concentrate on "this world." The aim is to help all people live better lives.

STEP TWO

Where does the context of this Bible passage begin and end?

> We find Proverbs 31:10-31 in the context of Proverbs 31:1-31. Chapter 31 begins with the title: "The words of King Lemuel. An oracle that his mother taught him." As a result, when we read the proverbs found in 31:10-31 which describe an "excellent wife"—we do well to remember this. The author writes these particular proverbs from the attitude of Lemuel's mother. All mothers want an excellent wife for their son. So in these proverbs, Lemuel's mother may be a bit too confident in what she expects from a daughter-in-law.
>
> The context actually extends all the way back to chapter 1. This speaks of the purpose of the Proverbs: to "know wisdom" (verse 2) and that "the fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge" (verse 7). Now, at the end of the very last chapter of Proverbs, the reader is given this information. It describes how a married woman should live if she knows wisdom and fears the LORD (31:30).

STEP THREE

What was God saying through this Bible passage to the original audience back then?

God, "through the words of King Lemuel...that his mother taught him" is showing something for everyone. This is how an "excellent wife" lives her life according to wisdom and in the fear of the LORD. The poetic couplets are mostly synonymous parallelism. They show how it is for a married woman to live wisely. She will be careful and hard working. She will look after the needs of her family.

STEP FOUR

What is the general principle that God had in mind through this Bible passage for all people and all cultures?

The general principle here is for married women who fear the Lord. But it is also for all woman, whether they are married or single—as well as for all men.

> 'Here is how to live a wise life in the fear of the LORD. You will be careful and hard-working and will look after the needs of your family.'

Relating Strategies

STEP FIVE

What is God saying through this Bible passage to you today?

Here once again Step 5 comes directly out of Step 4. For me today, as a Christian this is what I need to do if I want to live a wise life. I must fear the LORD. Then I need to be careful, hard-working and look after the needs of my family.

STEP SIX

What is God saying through this Bible passage to your community of believers today?

Here Steps 5 and 6 will be very similar.

If any of us—whether men or women, married or single—want to live a wise life we must do this. We must fear the LORD. Then we need to be careful, hard-working and look after the needs of our families.

STEP SEVEN

How will you communicate the truths of this Bible passage to your community of believers?

In answering this question, it might be helpful to first think about the following questions in relationship to poetry:

1. In what ways does your community of believers think about poetry today? How much is it a part of their daily lives?

2. How much is poetry a part of their spoken and written literature outside of the Bible? How much poetry is a part of the popular songs that they sing and/or listen to?

3. Is the poetry that they have based more on rhyme or rhythm? Or might there be some other way that they express their poetry? Suppose their poetry is similar to Old Testament Hebrew parallelism. How will that fact help you as you communicate the truths of biblical poetry?

4. Have there been any local events within your community in the past 6 months that might relate to this Bible passage? Describe these events and their effect upon the worldview of your community of believers.

5. Are there any proverbs, stories, music dramas, dance, about wise wives in the culture of your community? If so, can you use them to relate the truths of this Bible passage?

6. What media from your culture (film, TV show, song,) might help you communicate the truths of this Bible passage to your community?

For *my* community of American believers:

Believers in the United States will read this Proverbs passage from their own culture's attitudes towards married women. They will look at their place in both the home as well as in the workplace. Many will see the passage from the attitude of their own cultural context of "women's freedom" and women's equality. As a result, some will interpret this passage positively. The wife in this Proverbs passage is living her life wisely in both the home and the workplace. They will say that this Proverbs passage is a good example for all women who desire to life wise lives. Others will in-

terpret the passage as that of a mother-in-law who expects perfection. No wife of the 21st century can ever live up to it. As a result, they would not ignore this Proverbs passage It does have good advice about living wisely. But they see it in context as the words of a mother-in-law concerning her future daughter-in-law. So they do not see it as the chief standard or measurement for wives today.

For *your* community of believers:

Many communities of believers around the world have very different cultural understandings concerning just what makes for an "excellent wife." What attitudes do your community have towards the place that both Christian and non-Christian wives have in their homes, families, and workplaces? You will need to make an effort to understand both your own culture's expectations as well as the biblical understanding. (Proverbs 31:10-31). You should look especially for things that are similar between your culture's understandings and the Proverbs passage. As you do, you will want to remember how you might communicate the truths of this Proverbs passage in your own culture.

Conclusion

Good job! You are *doing* Bible interpretation! Now you are learning how to interpret the literature form of poetry. You should have closely followed the Reading Strategies of Steps 1-4 and the Relating Strategies of Steps 5-7. These showed you how to read and relate poetry both for yourself as well as for your community. You will get a chance to do that yourself in the section below, "Making the Bible *Come Alive!*"

Questions To Think About

1. Why is it necessary to see that Hebrew poetry is based on a balance of rhythm? (This is also called parallelism.)

2. Why is understanding the various types of Hebrew parallelism helpful to us as we interpret poetry?

3. How does your own community of believers look at the literature form of poetry in their own lives as well as in the Bible?

Making the Bible *Come Alive!*

1. Read the poetry found in Proverbs 1:8-9. Give special attention to the type of Hebrew parallelism found in these two verses.

2. Then do Bible interpretation on this passage. Study this poetry on the basis of the Reading Strategies of Steps 1-4 and the Relating Strategies of Steps 5-7. You can find these in Appendix A.

3. Don't forget to pray through each Step!

CHAPTER 11

How to Interpret Prophecy

Introduction

Prophecy can be a difficult literary form to interpret. Part of the difficulty is that there is much discussion about prophets and prophecy today. Also false prophets arise from time to time. These facts affect how we look at prophecy in the Bible. But we need to understand prophecy and how it functions in Scripture since prophecy is found throughout the Bible. We find Prophecy in the books of the Old Testament known as the four major (longer writings) prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel. We also find prophecy in the books of the Old Testament known as the 12 minor (shorter writings) prophets: Hosea, Joel, Amos, among others. In the New Testament we find prophecy among individuals who are called prophets. Prophecy in the early church is a specific spiritual gift.

So how will we approach the literature form of prophecy? We will interpret it as a literature form. We will not be concerned about whether or

not there are prophets today. We will not be concerned about interpreting future events according to prophecies. Nor will we be concerned about questions related to the spiritual gift of prophecy. These topics are important. But they do not help us much in trying to interpret prophecy that we find in the Bible. It is important for you to know how to interpret this literature form. It often is a very interesting topic for your community of believers.

So let us look at how to interpret prophecy!

Background

Four General Points about Prophecy

There are four general points we must look at before we study how to interpret prophecy. They influence both how prophecy was first given as well as how we look at prophecy today:

1. **The Definition of a Prophet.** A prophet is a person who speaks for God. He or she declares God's will to the people. The emphasis is on the *message* of the prophet.

2. **The Historical Setting of the Prophet.** The prophets spoke their messages in certain specific historical settings. To understand the message of the prophets we must first understand the historical situation in which the prophet preached his message. At the same time, the cultures of the Bible times of the prophets were very different from most of our cultures today. As a result, there is often no direct connection between our time and their time. So we must look for the general principle (Step 4).

3. **The Life Situation of the Prophet.** The prophet's own life situation was often closely linked with his message. For example, Hosea's marriage to a prostitute was a representation of Israel's relationship with God. As a result, the Bible interpreter must pay close attention to the various events in the prophet's life. This is in addition to the personal experiences that the prophet has with God.

4. **The Message of the Prophet.** The message of the prophet was spoken at first. It was spoken and/or preached to the

people. These short speeches are called "oracles." The message of any oracle begins with God. The prophet then communicates what God says. He used his own words in ways that the people can understand. Often he preached these oracles in poetic form. They are very similar to other Hebrew poetry. Compare the four types of Hebrew parallelism that we have just studied in Chapter 10.

Once again, it is important to remember that the prophecy you are reading was not *originally* intended for you. As a result, the specific issues that the prophet deals with in his message are usually not your specific issues. Nor are they those of your local community of believers.

Whenever we look at prophecy and how to interpret it, it is good to remember these four general points. They form the background to the prophecy that we find throughout the Bible.

Two Types of Prophecy

Prophecy is fairly easy to interpret when you remember that prophecy involves *both* forth-telling and foretelling.

Forth-telling: Prophecy as f*orth-telling* is mainly challenging the people. It is calling the people to repentance from their disobedience or from their doubting. Often this is so that God might deliver them. Thus, the prophet's message is often one of death or freedom. Forth-telling is also giving the people God's blessing because of their obedience. Most prophecy is forth-telling.

Forth-telling always has a *present aspect*. It relates to the people in their present situations.

Foretelling: Prophecy as *foretelling* is essentially about the future. The prophet announces the future as part of his message. However, such foretelling has its basis in the present situation of the people. It always comes out of the forth-telling challenge. *Not all prophecy is foretelling.*

Foretelling always has a *future aspect*. It relates to something that will happen in the future as a result of the present situation of the people.

Interpreting prophecy as forth-telling and/or foretelling is sometimes difficult for today. This is because prophecy is both forth-telling and foretelling. It is also because any foretelling has its basis in forth-telling. It always has something to do with the *present situation* of the people. The situations then are usually not the same situations of today. So we need to pay more attention to the general principle (Step 4) of the passage for all peoples and cultures.

Let us now look at a specific example of how to interpret prophecy. We will look at prophecies of the prophet Isaiah found in Isaiah 7:10-17.

Studying Prophecy: An Example from Isaiah 7:10-17

I will take you through doing the "Seven Steps" and the Reading and Relating Strategies in order. I will do this as we examine the verses found in Isaiah 7:10-17. These verses read:

> [10]"Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, [11]"Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol(the grave) or high as heaven." [12]But Ahaz said, "I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test." [13]And he said, "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary men, that you weary my God also? [14]Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel. [15]He shall eat curds and honey when he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. [16]For before the boy knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land whose two kings you dread will be deserted. [17]The LORD will bring upon you and upon your people and upon your father's house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah—the king of Assyria." '

Reading Strategies

STEP ONE

What kind of literature form is this Bible passage and what are the effects of this?

The literature form found in Isaiah 7:10-17 is prophecy. As a result, the situation that the prophet Isaiah is addressing to King Ahaz may or may not be our same situation. We may need to look

for the general principle of the verses in order for the passage to have meaning for us today.

STEP TWO

Where does the context of this Bible passage begin and end?

Isaiah 7:10-17 is found in the context of Isaiah 7:1-8:4. The historical context is this. Syria and the northern kingdom of Israel have united against the southern kingdom of Judah and Jerusalem, ruled by King Ahaz. King Ahaz is afraid (Is. 7:1-2). The prophet Isaiah is sent to comfort Ahaz (Is. 7:3). Through forth-telling he encourages him not to fear. In the middle of this forth-telling he foretells that this alliance between Syria and Israel will be destroyed. Isaiah encourages Ahaz to stay firm in his faith in God (Is. 7:4-9).

Isaiah 7:10-17 follows. Here God, in order to convince Ahaz, tells him to ask for a sign that what Isaiah says will be true. Ahaz refuses (Is. 7:10-12). The prophet Isaiah then says that God will indeed give Ahaz a sign (Is. 7:13), forth-telling that God will be with him when "The virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel" (Is. 7:14). A son will be born at that time. Before he is old enough to make decisions, Assyria will destroy the two kings threatening Judah (Is. 7:15-17).

The thought of Isaiah 7:10-17 continues on throughout verses 18-25. But the following verses all refer to the same fact that was about to happen. Assyria will destroy Syria and the northern kingdom and Judah will receive God's kindness. As a result, Isaiah 7:10-17 should be seen as something complete in itself. Isaiah 7:1-9 describes the situation. Isaiah 7:18-25 follows up with what will happen.

STEP THREE

What was God saying through this Bible passage to the original audience back then?

God, through Isaiah, is telling King Ahaz (and the people of Judah) not to fear the events that are occurring. These are the political agreement between Syria and the northern kingdom. This is the encouragement. Do not fear, God will take care of you. Out of this forth-telling the foretelling comes. God will give Ahaz a

sign. In the near future a child will be born to the virgin and his name will be Immanuel, "God with us." This will show Ahaz and the people of Judah that God is indeed with them. This foretelling was fulfilled with the birth of a son to the virgin (the prophet Isaiah's second wife, the prophetess of Isaiah 8:3-4?). Within two years Assyria had destroyed Syria and the northern kingdom.

In the New Testament Matthew uses the promise of Isaiah 7:14 to foretell the birth of the final Immanuel, Jesus Himself (Matt. 1:23). The foretelling of Isaiah 7:14 is ultimately referring to Jesus. But it was also *first* fulfilled for both Isaiah and Ahaz with the arrival of Assyria. This led to the defeat of the two kingdoms. Matthew correctly uses Isaiah 7:14 as a proof for the foretelling of the supernatural birth of Jesus. But neither Isaiah nor Ahaz knew of this second and messianic foretelling that was to happen much further in the future. God, of course, knew all of this! He was the One who told Matthew to quote Isaiah 7:14 in relationship to the birth of His Son.

Isaiah 7:14 is thus another good reminder to us to be careful to always let the text speak for itself, first.

STEP FOUR

What is the general principle that God had in mind through this Bible passage for all people and all cultures?

The general principle here is a bit more complicated. This is because of both parts of forth-telling and foretelling, as well as the near and far nature of the foretelling. The general principle is this:

In times of trouble God is always in control of history. His followers who obey Him do not need to fear. God is with them. This promise is especially seen in His Son, Jesus Christ.

Relating Strategies

STEP FIVE

What is God saying through this Bible passage to you today?

Here once again Step 5 comes directly out of Step 4. Today, as a follower of Jesus, I need to recognize this. In times of trouble in my life God is in control and I need not fear. He is with me, especially through His Son, Jesus Christ.

STEP SIX

What is God saying through this Bible passage to your community of believers today?

My community of believers today usually sees prophecy in the Bible more as foretelling rather than as forth-telling. They seldom understand that foretelling first comes out of forth-telling.

As a result, with this Isaiah 7:10-17 passage my community would view it as primarily foretelling the birth of Jesus. They would not see that the passage, especially verse 14, had a purpose for the original audience in Isaiah's time. I would have to show my community how Step 6 comes out of Steps 4 and 5. I would need to show them that the passage originally meant something first to Ahaz and the people of Judah. Once they understood this fact, then Isaiah 7:10-17 would remind my community of believers that God is in control. Even in times of trouble we need not fear. God is with us, especially through His Son, Jesus Christ.

STEP SEVEN

How will you communicate the truths of this Bible passage to your community of believers?

In answering this question, it might be helpful to first think about the following questions in relationship to prophecy:

1. What attitudes do your community of believers have towards prophets and prophecy today? What is their attitude to someone today who is considered a prophet? Are they positive or negative towards prophets? Are these prophets within their community or outside? What is their response when the prophet is incorrect?

2. Does your community of believers understand prophecy as *forth-telling* (exhortation) or *foretelling* (prediction) or both?

What attitudes does your community have towards the prophets and prophecies (both forth-telling and foretelling) in the Bible?

3. If they occur, in what ways are modern-day prophecies, or prophetic words, communicated in your community of believers? Is it through word of mouth, texting, newspapers, internet, radio, TV? How do they see these prophecies in relationship to their own daily lives?

4. What local events connected with prophets and/or prophecies have occurred within your community of believers in the past 6 months? Do they give understanding into how they interpret prophecy? Describe these events and their effect upon the world view of your community of believers.

5. Are there any stories which are part of your community's culture that you can use to tell the truths of this Bible passage? You could also refer to festivals, music, dramas, ceremonies, dance, and so on.

6. What media from your culture (film, TV show, song,) might help you communicate the truths of this Bible passage to your community?

For *my* community of American believers:

My community of believers in the United States does not have much interest in prophecy in their own cultural context. There are not many modern-day prophets. I would have to show my community the relationship between forth-telling and foretelling. Also I would have to show that this Isaiah 7:10-17 passage meant something first to Ahaz and the people of Judah.

For *your* community of believers:

In many communities around the world both prophets and prophecy are a part of daily life. If that is true for your community you will have plenty of illustrations of prophets and what they do. Be sure to talk about local prophetic events. Do this especially in relation to the biblical understanding of prophecy to both forth-telling and foretelling. Always remember this. You will want to discover in your own culture those ways that you might best communicate the truths of this Isaiah 7:10-17 passage.

Conclusion

Good job! You are *doing* Bible interpretation! Now you know how to interpret the literature form of prophecy. You should have followed the Reading Strategies of Steps 1-4 and the Relating Strategies of Steps 5-7. You will have seen how to read and relate prophecy both for yourself as well as for your community of believers. You will get a chance to do that yourself in the section below, "Making the Bible *Come Alive!*"

Questions To Think About

1. Why is it so important to see that prophecy is either forth-telling or foretelling? Why does foretelling always come out of forth-telling?

2. Why is understanding the historical context of the prophet and his prophecy so important to a correct interpretation?

3. How does your own community of believers look at the literature form of prophecy in their own lives as well as in the Bible?

Making the Bible *Come Alive!*

1. Read the story of the prophet Jonah in Jonah 3:1-10. Give special attention to the prophetic words that God spoke through Jonah to the people of Nineveh in verse 4.

2. Do Bible interpretation on this passage. Study this prophecy on the basis of the Reading Strategies of Steps 1-4 and the Relating Strategies of Steps 5-7. You will find these in Appendix A.

3. Don't forget to pray through each Step!

CHAPTER 12

How to Interpret the Sayings of Jesus

Introduction

Jesus was a master teacher. He knew how to communicate his messages in such a way that everyone could understand him. This included young and old, rich and poor, very educated Pharisees and ordinary people without education. He communicated with such skill and authority that very often people who heard him "were astonished at his teaching" (Matt. 7:28). Some even questioned where he got his learning: "How is it that this man has learning, when he has never studied?" (John 7:15).

Jesus could tell a good story. He could be very serious with his words as well as saying things using wit and humor (qualities to amuse people). He never tired of challenging the Jewish religious leaders with a clever play on words. He often had a good question in turn to answer their many trick questions. The crowds loved sitting and listening to Jesus speak for hours at a time. And they remembered what he said. As far as we know,

Jesus never wrote anything down. He never wrote a Gospel. People remembered the sayings of Jesus as well as the other teachings and events in his life. Then they passed these on to other people by speaking to them. Later the four Gospel writers Matthew, Mark, Luke and John collected and wrote down these sayings.

As a master teacher Jesus used many different ways to communicate his teachings that we find today in the four Gospels. One major way that Jesus communicated was through using *figures of speech*. A figure of speech is a way to say something in a dramatic way. It is a way to communicate a message so that people can remember it more easily. Study some of the figures of speech that Jesus used. Then you will gain great understanding of the ways that he communicated.

We will limit this chapter to looking at just a few of Jesus' sayings and his figures of speech. These will give you a better understanding of how to interpret the many sayings of Jesus. In the next chapter, we will look in more detail at how Jesus communicated through parables.

So let us look at how to interpret the sayings of Jesus in the Gospels!

Background

The Sayings of Jesus and Figures of Speech

There are many different figures of speech that Jesus used. Here we will look at six different types with examples of each type:

1. **Exaggeration.** Exaggeration is an overstating of the obvious. This is saying more than what is really meant to make a point. Here are some examples of Jesus' use of exaggeration:

> 'Why do you see the dirt that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, "Let me take the dirt out of your eye," when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye. Then you will see clearly to take the dirt out of your brother's eye' (Matt. 7:3-5).

And:

> 'And the disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how difficult it is to enter the

> kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God" ' (Mark 10:24-25).

In both of these examples Jesus' use of exaggeration is clear. A person cannot physically have a log in his or her eye. A camel is too big to go through the eye of a needle. In both cases Jesus is exaggerating to make his point. Do not think that His exaggeration is real.

In the Matthew 7:3-5 example, Jesus is not really speaking about dirt, eyes and logs. Rather, he is telling us not to be so quick to see somebody else's faults. We also have big faults in our own lives. The context of Matthew 7:1-5 makes his point clear.

In the Mark 10:24-25 example, Jesus is not really speaking about camels and eyes of needles. Rather, he is saying that it is really difficult for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. The context of Mark 10:17-27, especially verse 23, makes his point clear.

2. **Hyperbole.** Hyperbole is a deliberate extreme overstatement and exaggeration to make a point. Sometimes it can be difficult to distinguish exaggeration from hyperbole. The way to distinguish the difference is the extremeness of the exaggeration. Here are some examples of Jesus' use of hyperbole:

> "If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your body parts than that your whole body is thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your body parts than that your whole body go into hell" (Matt. 5:29-30).

And:

> "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26).

In both of these examples Jesus' use of hyperbole is clear. He is not encouraging people to tear out their right eyes or cut off their

right hands so that they do not sin. Nor are they really supposed to hate their families and even their own life. In both cases Jesus is using excessive exaggeration to make his point. We must not understand His hyperbole as if it were real.

In the Matthew 5:29-30 example, Jesus is not really speaking about tearing out right eyes and cutting off right hands. Rather, he is making a point about the seriousness of sin in our lives. We need to do something about that sin since it can indeed in the end lead to hell. The context of Matthew 5:29-30 (and the greater context of 5:21-48) makes his point clear. People in Jesus' day were thinking that if they simply obeyed the words of the law they were without sin. For example if they did not commit the actual act of adultery they were not sinners. It did not matter what they thought about a woman in their heart. Jesus, through his use of hyperbole, shows them the foolishness of their thinking. If they even looked at a woman with sexual desire they had sinned.

In the Luke 14:26 example, Jesus is not really speaking about hating family and self. Rather, he is talking about the need for a disciple of his to consider carefully the cost of being his disciple. People cannot be disciples of Jesus in a careless way. The context of Luke 14:25-33 makes his point clear. He says that a disciple must carry his or her own cross (verse 27). He also tells stories about counting the cost (verses 28-32) and giving up everything (verse 33).

3. **Counter Question.** Counter question is a method of arguing. Someone uses a question to answer a previous question or reply. The purpose of a counter question is to get the asker of the original question to try to defend it. Or it is to have the asker think more carefully about what he asked. Jesus especially enjoyed using counter questions when the Jewish religious leaders asked him a question. Here are some examples of Jesus' use of counter question:

> 'And a man was there with a withered hand. And they asked him, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?"—They wanted to accuse him of doing wrong. He said to them, "Which one of you who has a sheep, if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not lift it out" ' (Matt. 12:11-12).

And:

> ‘And they came again to Jerusalem. And as he was walking in the temple, the chief priests and the scribes and the elders came to him. They said to him, “By what authority are you doing these things, or who gave you this authority to do them?” Jesus said to them, “I will ask you one question. Answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things. Was the baptism of John from heaven or from man? Answer me” ’ (Mark 11:27-30).

In both of these examples Jesus answers the one asking the question with his own question. In the Matthew 12:1-2 example, the context of Matthew 12:9-14 makes his point clear. Jesus wants the religious leaders to think more carefully about law, Sabbath, and helping human beings. His counter question is followed by his healing of the man with the withered hand.

In the Mark 11:27-30 example, the context of Mark 11:27-33 shows that the religious leaders’ question challenges the authority of Jesus. Instead of answering them directly Jesus gives his counter question. This causes them to think more carefully just who Jesus is.

4. **Simile.** A simile is a comparison of two things using the words “like” or “as.” The comparison often involves a word picture in order to aid understanding. It is not a real thing. Here are some examples of Jesus’ use of simile:

> ‘Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the middle of wolves. So be wise as serpents and innocent as doves’ (Matt. 10:16).

And:

> And he said to them, ‘I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven’ (Luke 10:18).

In the Matthew 10:16 example, the simile “as” is used three times and each time a word picture is used. The greater context (Matthew 10) shows Jesus sending out his twelve disciples. In verse 16 Jesus talks about the kind of sending that will occur. People will easily attack the disciples in the middle of a world full of enemies. They will be “as sheep” who really do not have much of a defense

against wolves. As a result, these disciples need to be wise and at the same time innocent. Jesus uses the word pictures "as serpents" and "as doves" to imply "wisdom" and "innocence."

In the Luke 10:18 example, the simile "like" is used. As a result, Satan did not really fall "like lightening from heaven" as the word picture illustrates. Rather the context of Luke 10:17-20 refers to deeds the seventy-two disciples carried out when they were sent out (10:1) with Jesus' authority (verse 19). When they came back they said: "We can even overcome the demons in your name!" (verse 17). All of this resulted in the further decrease of Satan and his authority.

5. **Proverb.** A proverb is a short saying that contains a truth that is worth remembering. When Jesus speaks a proverb we do not know if he is quoting an already well-known proverb. He may be making up his own. Either way, the point is to try to understand the truth in the proverb that is worth remembering. Here are some examples of Jesus' use of proverb:

> 'And when Jesus heard it, he said this to them. "Those who are well do not need a doctor. But those who are sick do. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners" ' (Mark 2:17).

And:

> 'Jesus said to him, "No one who starts to plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God" ' (Luke 9:62).

In both of these examples we do not know if Jesus is quoting from an already known proverb. He may be making up his own proverb to fit the situation. In the Mark 2:17 example, the context is Mark 2:15-17 showing Jesus eating with "tax collectors and sinners" (verse 15). The religious leaders ask his disciples why he eats with such people (verse 16). Jesus' reply is in two parts. In the first part he tells the proverb: "Those who are well do not need a doctor but those who are sick" (verse 17a). In the second part he comments on the proverb: "I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (verse 17b). Here his comments on the proverb explain the proverb's point.

In the Luke 9:62 example, Jesus gives the proverb without comment. The context is the cost involved in following Jesus (Luke 9:57-62) of which this proverb forms the conclusion. The point of the proverb is seen in this context. If anyone wants to follow Jesus he or she cannot be turned away by the things of this world. The kingdom of God must come first.

6. **Irony.** Irony is an expression that means the opposite of what the words actually say. The point of the irony is to give emphasis to the obvious. Here are some examples of Jesus' use of irony:

> 'And he said to them, "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition!"' (Mark 7:9).

And:

> 'Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?"' (John 3:10).

In both of these examples the irony gives emphasis to the obvious. In the Mark 7:9 example, from the context of Mark 7:1-13, it is obvious that the Pharisees and scribes have many commandments. These have established their customs. But as they established their customs, they have rejected the commandment of God. This is because in all of their traditions "their heart is far from me" (verse 6).

In the John 3:10 example, the context of John 3:1-21 shows this. The Pharisee Nicodemus, as a teacher of Israel, should be wise in the ways of the kingdom of God and eternal life. The irony is that in his wisdom he still lacks understanding.

Three General Points about Interpreting the Sayings of Jesus

There are three general points to consider when interpreting the sayings of Jesus. Let us look at each one in turn.

1. **Figures of Speech are Universal.** The beauty of Jesus' use of figures of speech is this. The majority of cultures and languages today still use figures of speech. Think of the many figures of speech that your own language uses. This is one of the reasons why the words of Jesus are so easy to understand. (But they are not always so easy to obey!).

   There is both an advantage and a disadvantage to the fact that figures of speech are universal. It is an advantage because we are already familiar with how figures of speech work in our own language. For example, exaggeration is exaggeration, or a proverb is a proverb. And this is where the disadvantage arises. We think that we know the literature form well. We are sometimes in danger of missing the very point that Jesus is trying to make with his figure of speech. We must remember that *familiarity does not always equal understanding.*

2. **Decide the Type of Figure of Speech the Saying Is.** So far in this chapter we have looked at some of the major types of figures of speech that Jesus uses. There are others. If you are familiar with how language works in your own culture, this will help you to identify these others. Again, knowing the kind of figure of speech that Jesus uses will help you understand and interpret what Jesus is saying.

3. **Decide where the Context begins and ends.** As we already talked about in Step 2 of the "Seven Steps," context is especially important. This is true when you attempt to interpret the sayings of Jesus and the figures of speech that he uses. As we have already seen in in this chapter, *every* figure of speech must be seen in its context.

Whenever we look at figures of speech and how to interpret them, it is good to remember these three general points.

Let us now look at a specific example of how to interpret the sayings of Jesus. We will look at his sayings found in Matthew 8:18-22.

Studying Jesus Sayings: An Example from Matthew 8:18-22

I will take you through doing the "Seven Steps" and the Reading and Relating Strategies in order. We will examine the verses found in Matthew 8:18-22. These verses are:

> [18]'Now when Jesus saw a crowd around him, he gave orders to go over to the other side. [19]And a scribe came up and said to him, "Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go." [20]And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." [21]Another of the disciples said to him, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." [22]And Jesus said to him, "Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead." '

Reading Strategies

STEP ONE

What kind of literature form is this Bible passage and what are the effects of this?

The literature form in Matthew 8:18-22 is a story about Jesus that contains two sayings of Jesus. In the total context of this story the sayings of Jesus are stressed. So we need to look for the possibility that in these sayings Jesus may be using figures of speech. In answer to the first question of the scribe (verse 19) Jesus uses hyperbole, or excessive exaggeration, in his answer. He may be using a known proverb to emphasize the hyperbole. ("Foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests," verse 20). It is hyperbole because Jesus has had, and will continue to have, places to lay his head (somewhere to sleep). In using this hyperbole Jesus is stressing something to this rather overenthusiastic scribe. He had said "I will follow you wherever you go." Jesus tells him that there will be a cost if he following him.

In answer to the second question by the disciple (verse 21) Jesus again uses hyperbole in his answer. Once again he may also be using a known proverb to emphasize the hyperbole. ("Leave the dead to bury their own dead," verse 22). It is hyperbole because it is not physically possible for the dead "to bury their own dead." In using this hyperbole Jesus is once again stressing the cost involved in following him. If you follow me you will not even be able to bury your close relatives.

STEP TWO

Where does the context of this Bible passage begin and end?

Matthew 8:18-22 is found in the context of Matthew chapter 8. When the chapter begins Jesus has just finished his "sermon on the mount." In fact he has just come down from the mountain (verse 8:1). This is quickly followed by: his cleansing of a leper (verses 2-4); the healing of the centurion's son (verses 5-13); and the healing of Peter's mother-in-law and many others (verses 14-17). In the context of these healings a crowd gathers (verse 18). Jesus takes the opportunity of the two questions to stress the cost of following him.

STEP THREE

What was God saying through this Bible passage to the original audience back then?

God, through Jesus, is saying that there is a cost to following Jesus.

STEP FOUR

What is the general principle that God had in mind through this Bible passage for all people and all cultures?

The general principle here is exactly the same as for the original audience:

For everyone, no matter of what language or culture, there is a cost to following Jesus.

Relating Strategies

STEP FIVE

What is God saying through this Bible passage to you today?

Here once again Step 5 comes directly out of Step 4. For me today, as a follower of Jesus, I need to recognize that there is a cost if I follow Jesus.

STEP SIX

What is God saying through this Bible passage to your community of believers today?

Here Steps 5 and 6 will be very similar. If any of us truly wants to follow after Jesus we need to remember that there is a cost.

STEP SEVEN

How will you communicate the truths of this Bible passage to your community of believers?

In answering this question, it might be helpful to first think about the following questions in relationship to figures of speech:

1. How does your community of believers think about the sayings of Jesus? How familiar are they with some of his most famous sayings? Are they positive or negative towards these sayings of Jesus?

2. In what ways do they view figures of speech today? How much is it a part of their daily lives? What kinds of figures of speech do they most often use?

3. Are figures of speech a part of their spoken and written literature outside of the Bible?

4. Have there been any local events within your community in the past 6 months that might relate to this Bible passage? Describe these events and their effect upon the world view of your community of believers.

5. Think of proverbs, stories, music dramas, dance, and so on, about counting the cost. Are there any that are part of the culture of your community? Can you use them to relate the truths of this Bible passage?

6. What media from your culture (films, TV show, song,) might help you communicate the truths of this Bible passage to your community?

For *my* community of American believers:

My community of believers in the United States will read these sayings of Jesus from the attitude of their own culture. Its stress is upon physical possessions, seeking pleasure and trying to avoid suffering. The aim is to be always as comfortable as possible. American culture does not think much about counting the cost.

This American cultural view has influenced the American Church as well. Few American Christians have seriously considered the cost of truly following Jesus. They are often more concerned about their own comfort. These sayings of Jesus in Matthew 8:18-22 remind us constantly that the decision to follow Jesus should not be taken easily. These sayings challenge their American way of life. It often goes against truly following Jesus.

For *your* community of believers:

Many communities of believers around the world are experiencing great suffering and persecution. They have great difficulty in living their Christian lives. They know the cost of following Jesus. If your community of believers is facing difficult situations then these sayings of Jesus will be very real to them. If they are not, then you may have a similar difficulty in making these sayings come alive as does the American Church. Again, remember to attempt to communicate the truths of these sayings of Jesus in the situation of your own culture.

Conclusion

Good job! You are *doing* Bible interpretation! Now you are learning how to interpret the sayings of Jesus. You should have followed the Reading Strategies of Steps 1-4 and the Relating Strategies of Steps 5-7. So you have learnt how to read and relate the sayings of Jesus both for yourself as well as for your community. You will get a chance to do that yourself in the section below, "Making the Bible *Come Alive!*"

Questions To Think About

1. Why is knowing that Jesus was a master teacher in his own time helpful for understanding Jesus in your own time period?

2. Why is understanding the various types of figures of speech helpful to us as we interpret the sayings of Jesus?

3. How does your own community of believers look at figures of speech in their own lives as well as in the Bible?

Making the Bible *Come Alive!*

1. Read again the sayings of Jesus found in Matthew 7:3-5 that we already studied above. Pay special attention to the figures of speech that Jesus is using.

2. Do Bible interpretation on this passage. Study these sayings of Jesus by following the Reading Strategies of Steps 1-4 and the Relating Strategies of Steps 5-7. You will find these in Appendix A.

3. Don't forget to pray through each Step!

CHAPTER 13

How to Interpret the Parables of Jesus

Introduction

As we already saw in the last chapter, Jesus was a master teacher. One of his most well-known and effective ways of communicating was through parables. Jesus told parables to all sorts of people: his disciples, the religious leaders of the day, and crowds of ordinary people. And the crowds loved him. But why did Jesus teach in parables?

Jesus taught in parables because everybody enjoys a good story. At its center, a parable is simply a story. But it is much more than just a story. A parable is a story that is trying to make a point. That is what the very word "parable" means. It is a story that is making its point through comparing things. In many ways a parable is just a longer simile. It is similar to those that we studied in the previous chapter. Lots of Jesus' public teaching was through parables. As a result, it is important for you to know how to interpret Jesus' parables.

So let us look at how to interpret parables!

Background

Five Points about Parables

Before we look at how to interpret parables there are five general points about Jesus' parables to keep in mind:

1. **Parables Come from the Everyday Lives of the People.** The information for Jesus' parables came from the daily lives of those who were hearing the parables. Almost everyone could relate events like: looking for a lost coin, wedding customs, sowing seed in a field, or dishonest managers. Jesus used examples from everyday life. That is one reason why his parables were so popular with the people.

2. **Look for the Main Point.** As we already read above, a parable is a story that is trying to make a point. As a result, it is important when we try to interpret the parable to look for the main point. In other words, what is Jesus really trying to say through the parable? If a parable is making its point through comparing things, what is it that Jesus is comparing? Sometimes this main point is very easy to find, especially when Jesus talks about the kingdom of God. At other times, it is more difficult. Here is why it is so important to look at the parable in its total context.

3. **The Details Are Not Important.** While the main point of a parable is important, the specific details you find in a parable are usually not important. Sometimes interpreters will get too concerned about the many details of a parable. They will try to give a spiritual meaning to the characters and events in the parable. This is known as allegory. Though allegory can be a helpful teaching tool (like Paul does in Galatians 4:24) it is not usually useful with parables. The reason is because it takes attention away from the main point. Again, it is most important to give attention to what the main point of the parable is, not the details.

4. **Understand the Purpose of the Parable for *Both* Jesus and the Gospel Writer.** We interpret the parables of Jesus more accurately when we look at two things. We need to see what Jesus had in mind *for his original audience* when he told the

parable. We also need to see what at what the Gospel writer had in mind when he recorded the parable *for his audience*. In other words, Jesus had a reason why he spoke the parable to his original audience. The Gospel writer had a reason for why he remembered and/or recorded the parable for his audience. Often these purposes will be similar, or very nearly so. This double purpose is true for all the sayings of Jesus. But it is particularly important to consider in relationship to parables. If we understand the purpose of the parable for both Jesus and the Gospel writer, we have a more complete understanding of the parable. This more complete understanding will help us in Step 4 of the "Seven Steps." This is when we find out the general principle that God had in mind through this parable for all peoples and all cultures.

For example, look at the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, found in Luke 18:9-14. Luke gives his own short explanation of the parable for his audience in verse 9. Jesus gives his own explanation for his audience in verse 14. Though similar, taking both explanations together gives us a more complete understanding of Step 4. It is that the truly righteous ones are those who humble themselves.

5. **Parables Are Stories.** So it is helpful to deal with them in the same way as we interpreted stories in Chapter 8. Consequently, with parables it is also helpful to look at the What?, When? and/or Where?, Who?, and Why? Questions. They will help us better understand the parable. This is especially important in Steps 2, 3 and 4 of the "Seven Steps."

As a result, whenever we look at parables and how to interpret them it is good to remember these five general points.

Let us now look at a specific example of how to interpret a parable. Turn to the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37.

Studying Parables
The Parable of the Good Samaritan

I will take you through doing the "Seven Steps" and the Reading and Relating Strategies in order. We will examine the parable of the Good Samaritan found in Luke 10:25-37. These verses read:

[25] 'A lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" [26]He said to him, "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" [27]And he answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind. And you shall love your neighbor as yourself." [28]And he said to him, "You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live."

[29]But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" [30]Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho. He fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. [31]Now by chance a priest was going down that road. When he saw him he passed by on the other side. [32]So in the same way a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. [33]But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was. When he saw him, he had pity on him. [34]He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal. He brought him to an inn and took care of him. [35]And the next day he took out two coins and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, 'Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.' [36]Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?" [37]He said, "The one who showed him mercy." And Jesus said to him, "You go, and do the same." '

Reading Strategies

STEP ONE

What kind of literature form is this Bible passage and what are the effects of this?

The literature form found in Luke 10:25-37 is parable. As a result, the specific details found in the parable are not important. As a parable it is important to remember this. Both Jesus (by saying the parable) and Luke (by recording the parable) are trying to make a main point for their separate audiences. Also, since a parable is also a story we need to look at the questions: What?, When? and/or Where?, Who?, and Why.

STEP TWO

Where does the context of this Bible passage begin and end?

The actual parable itself is found in verses 29-35. But you cannot fully understand the parable without verses 25-28 and verses 36-37. Thus, the context of the entire parable in verses 25-37.

In the introduction, Luke sets the context of the parable with the lawyer asking Jesus a question about eternal life (verse 25). Note Luke's comment about the lawyer, that he was "putting Jesus to the test." Jesus answers with a counter question concerning the Law (verse 26). The lawyer answers the counter question (verse 27). Jesus replies that he has "answered correctly" (verse 28). The lawyer asks yet another question (verse 28). Note again Luke's comment "desiring to justify himself". Jesus answers this second question with the parable.

As we did with stories in Chapter 8, we can better understand the parable if we ask the following questions. These concern What?, When? and/or Where?, and Who?:

What? (**Act**)**:** A man travels from Jerusalem to Jericho, gets robbed, and someone helps him.

When? and/or Where? (**Place**)**:** After the lawyer asks Jesus the question: "And who is my neighbor?" (Note that the context does not give us specific time or location details.)

Who? (**Actors**)**:**
Major actors: Man who was traveling, priest, Levite, and the Samaritan.

Minor actors: robbers, innkeeper; also oil, wine, animal, two denarii.

Many parables will have major and minor actors. Major actors are most important to the parable. Minor actors are a part of the details from the everyday lives of the people. Once again, the details are not important in parable interpretation. In this parable it could have been one robber, or many. The man could have had a heart attack or some other accident on the way down to Jericho.

(This journey was known for the many robbers along the way). The Samaritan could have taken the man to an inn, a house, or some other place. Whether it was two denarii, or twenty, makes no real difference to the main point of the parable.

STEP THREE

What was God saying through this Bible passage to the original audience back then?

As we saw in Chapter 8 with stories, this is where the first part of the "Why?" question is important:

Why was the parable told in the first place?

The context shows us that through this parable Jesus is answering the lawyer's question: Who is my neighbor? This was a popular question in Jesus' day. The religious authorities loved to argue about it.

So what was God (in this case Jesus) saying to the audience back then?

Jesus was answering this question. Who is my neighbor? He compared a neighbor to the Samaritan, "the one who showed him mercy" (verse 27). For Jesus a neighbor is not just another Israelite (like the priest and Levite, who did not act like a neighbor in the parable). Rather, a neighbor can be anyone, even a Samaritan. (The Jews thought the Samaritans were worthless).

STEP FOUR

What is the general principle that God had in mind through this Bible passage for all people and all cultures?

Here is where the second part of the "Why?" question is important:

Why was the parable remembered and/or recorded?

Luke records this parable not only because Jesus actually spoke it to the lawyer. He also did so because it is right for the theological purposes that Luke has for his own audience. Luke is the only Gospel writer who records this parable. Why? Because the parable shows Luke's concern in his Gospel for the poor, sinners, women,

foreigners, and people with no place in society. For Luke, therefore, the answer of Jesus shows that even people whom others rejected can be neighbors. And who were more rejected than the Samaritans?. This was good news for Luke and especially for his audience. Everybody, regardless of their place in society, is our neighbor.

What God has in mind for everyone is this:

Love of neighbor crosses all boundaries. whether they are social, racial, religious, political, and so on. Even the people we reject the most are our neighbors.

Relating Strategies

STEP FIVE

What is God saying through this Bible passage to you today?

Once again, Step 5 usually comes out of Steps 3 and 4, and often will be very similar to Step 4. What God is saying to me is this:

The people that I reject the most are still my neighbors. I must deal with them as neighbors.

STEP SIX

What is God saying through this Bible passage to your community of believers today?

Here Steps 5 and 6 will be very similar.

They must see that those people whom they may most reject are still their neighbors. They must deal with them as neighbors.

STEP SEVEN

How will you communicate the truths of this Bible passage to your community of believers?

To answer this question, it might be helpful to first think about the following questions:

1. In your community of believers are there stories that they tell that are very similar to the parables of Jesus?

2. How does your community of believers think about the parables of Jesus?

3. Have there been any local events within your community in the past 6 months that might relate to this parable? Describe these events and their effect upon the world view of your community of believers.

4. Think of stories especially festivals, music, dramas, ceremonies, dance, about neighbors. Are there any that are already a part of the culture of your community of believers? Can you use them to relate the truths of this parable?

5. Sometimes it is helpful to retell the parable in your own words using examples from your own context. For example, several years ago I retold this parable in my own words to Christian university students. This was during a time in the USA when there was a lot of fear concerning those individuals who had HIV/AIDS. Many Christians were dealing with these individuals like the Jews dealt with the rejected Samaritans. What follows is my retelling of the parable of the Good Samaritan using examples from my own cultural context:

   "A man was walking through the UCLA campus late one night. He was attacked and robbed by some skinheads (violent people) outside one of the college houses. They beat him up, and left him in the bushes half dead. Early the next morning, a university campus pastor walked by. He saw the man lying there, and thought to himself: 'Another drunk student passed out again...when will they attend our AA meetings?' Later the leader of the university Campus Crusade group passed by on his way to a breakfast Bible study. 'Boy, that guy really needs the Four Spiritual Laws,' he said to himself. He pushed a tract in the man's pocket. But then a gay professor with AIDS came by on his bicycle. When he saw him he felt pity towards him. He quickly dialed up campus security on his mobile phone. He took care of the man's wounds the best he could. Then the university hospital ambulance arrived to take the man to the hospital's emergency room. 'I cannot go with you to the hospital,' the pro-

fessor said to the ambulance driver. 'I am on my way to a friend's funeral. But here is my debit card and pin number. Charge any expenses for this man to my account until I get there.' Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"

6. What media from your culture (film, TV show, song,) might help you communicate the truths of this parable to your community?

For *my* community of American believers:

My own community of believers in the United States has many opportunities to love their neighbors. This is especially true about those neighbors who are from a different race. My community of believers are mostly white individuals. However, my local community has been and is now receiving a great number of refugees and immigrants from outside of the United States. They are from many different races. This is a real challenge for my community of believers. A number of these recent arrivals are also from Muslim and Hindu religious communities. The main point of the parable of the Good Samaritan, therefore, is a real challenge for my community of believers today.

For *your* community of believers:

You may have similar examples in your own community context. Or many of your cultures may have a traditional story or song that may be very similar to this parable. If so, by all means use it! The point is, you will want to discover in your own culture those ways that you might communicate the truths of the Luke 10:25-37 passage.

Conclusion

Good job! You are *doing* Bible interpretation! Now you are learning how to interpret the literary form of parable. You have followed the Reading Strategies of Steps 1-4 and the Relating Strategies of Steps 5-7. You have learnt how to read and relate parables both for yourself as well as for your community of believers. You will get a chance to do it yourself in the section below, "Making the Bible *Come Alive*!"

Questions To Think About

1. Why is it important to look for the main point of a parable and not get turned away by the details in the parable?
2. Why is it necessary to look at how the Gospel writer used the parable for his own audience?
3. How does your own community of believers hear and tell parables?

Making the Bible Come Alive!

1. Read the parable found in Matthew 25:1-13.
2. Do Bible interpretation on this parable by studying it, following the Reading Strategies of Steps 1-4 and the Relating Strategies of Steps 5-7. You will find these in Appendix A. Be careful not to make the parable into an allegory.
3. Don't forget to pray through each Step!

CHAPTER 14

How to Interpret Letters

Introduction

Letters produce different responses in different people. Some look upon letters in a positive way. They enjoy receiving hand-written letters from friends and loved ones. Others, especially the poor, look at letters in a negative way. A letter is usually a bill. They may even get a notice telling them that they must leave their home! Around the world today emails, texts and Facebook posts are replacing letters. As a result, it is important for you to know how your community of believers looks at letters.

A letter, once again, is one of many forms of literature. Letters, sometimes called "epistles," fill the second half of the New Testament. The apostle Paul wrote most of these, but John, Peter and James also wrote some. They wrote most of these letters on specific occasions to specific audiences. They sent them to various parts of Asia Minor where there were congregations of the early church. These letters went to Rome,

Corinth, Ephesus, Galatia, and so on. They wrote many of these letters to individual Christians and churches some 2,000 years ago. But they still have much to say to us today.

So let us look at how to interpret letters!

Background

Four Points about Letters

Before we look at how to interpret letters there are four general points to remember:

1. **Only in the New Testament.** We only find the literature form of letter in the New Testament.

2. **They Were Not for You.** You are reading somebody else's mail! The particular New Testament letter you are reading was not *originally* intended for you. As a result, the specific subjects that the letter deals with are usually not your specific subjects. Nor are they those of your local community of believers.

3. **Original Context Is Sometimes Difficult.** The New Testament letters were written 2,000 years ago. So it is sometimes difficult to understand what the specific problems originally were.

   For example, in 1 Corinthians 15:29, why did Paul ask the Corinthians: "what do people mean by being baptized for the dead?" We have no idea why Paul asked the question and whether or not the Corinthians were baptizing for the dead. If they were, we do not know what they were actually doing.

   Also the cultures of the New Testament times were very different from most of our cultures today. As a result, there is often no direct connection between our time and their time. That is why it is often most helpful to look for the general principle (Step 4) of the passage.

4. **Danger of Proof-Texting.** Quite often people take pieces from New Testament letters out of context. Sometimes we use a sentence or phrase in a letter to support our own par-

ticular opinion. Or we use it to support our own ideas. This is "proof-texting." It is usually not a good practice for those who desire to be good interpreters of the Bible.

As a result, whenever we look at letters and how to interpret them it is good to remember these four general points. They form the situations in which people wrote the letters that we find in the New Testament.

Let us now look at a specific example of how to interpret a letter by looking at Ephesians 5:18.

Studying Letters
An Example from Ephesians 5:18

I will take you through doing the "Seven Steps" and the Reading and Relating Strategies in order. I will do this as we examine the verse found in Ephesians 5:18. This verse reads:

> 'And do not get drunk with wine, for that is immoral, but be filled with the Spirit ...'

Reading Strategies:

STEP ONE

What kind of literature form is this Bible passage and what are the effects of this?

The literature form found in Ephesians 5:18 is letter. The situation that the apostle Paul is writing about in the church at Ephesus may or may not be our same situation. We may need to look for the general principle (Step 4) of the verse in order for it to have meaning for us today.

STEP TWO

Where does the context of this Bible passage begin and end?

We find Ephesians 5:18 in the context that begins in verse 4:17. Here Paul tells the Ephesian believers that they "must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, with no purpose in their minds." From verse 4:17 to the end of the letter, Paul tells the Ephesian believers how to live their lives as followers of Jesus. Though the thought

of Ephesians 5:18 continues on throughout verses 19-21, verse 5:18 itself really fits better with the verses 15-17. It fits because each of these verses has a statement followed by a statement that contrasts with it.

> [15] 'Look carefully then how you live,
> not as unwise but as wise,
> [16]Making the best use of the time,
> because the days are evil.
> [17]Therefore do not be foolish,
> but understand what the will of the Lord is.
> [18]And do not get drunk with wine, for that is immoral,
> but be filled with the Spirit ...'

As a result, we can see Ephesians 5:18 as complete in itself. It consists of two statements which contrast. The verses immediately following (Eph. 5:19-21) give further details about what a life "filled with the Spirit" will look like.

STEP THREE

What was God saying through this Bible passage to the original audience back then?

Some in Paul's audience have a problem with wine. They are drinking so much of it that they get drunk. As a result they are living lives of immorality when they are drunk. Paul is calling them to be filled with the Holy Spirit instead.

Here, however, we need to clearly make a difference between drinking wine, or alcohol, and drunkenness. Paul is not telling the Ephesian believers to never drink any wine or alcohol. In fact, he tells Timothy to take a little wine for his stomach problems (see 1 Tim. 5:23). Even Jesus' first miracle was the turning of water into wine for the benefit of all those at a wedding feast (John 2:1-11). So clearly the drinking of wine is indeed allowed. What Paul is saying here in Ephesians 5:18 is that if the drinking of wine leads to drunkenness then it needs to stop. Drinking wine is allowed. Drinking it to the point of drunkenness is not allowed. That is immoral.

Of course, in Romans 14:21, Paul does speak against drinking wine when it causes a problem for weaker Christians. But in this Ephesians 5:18 passage he does not speak specifically either against drinking or about weaker Christians.

Ephesians 5:18 is a good reminder to us of two facts about good Bible interpretation that we have already mentioned:

1. We must be careful to always let the text speak for itself, first.
2. We must be careful not to use a particular text as a proof-text for our own opinions or beliefs.

STEP FOUR

What is the general principle that God had in mind through this Bible passage for all peoples and all cultures?

The general principle here is found right in the context of the verse itself:

Believers are not to be controlled by anything except the Holy Spirit.

It is important to note here that this general principle is not limited to wine. Yes, some in Paul's audience had a problem with wine. Wine was controlling them. When that happened, the Holy Spirit was not controlling them. But what God had in mind for all peoples and all cultures *goes far beyond* just wine. It is *anything* that controls believers rather than Holy Spirit.

Relating Strategies

STEP FIVE

What is God saying through this Bible passage to you today?

If I had a problem with getting drunk, then Step 3 would be relevant directly to me as Step 5. The fact is I do not drink wine or any alcohol at all. Since I do not drink wine it would be easy for me to say that this verse is not relevant to me. However, the *general principle* of Step 4 does not allow for this answer. The verse indeed is very relevant to me.

How? Here Step 5 comes directly out of Step 4. For me today, as a follower of Jesus, only the Holy Spirit should control me. This means anything in my life that controls me, and is not of the Holy Spirit, is a problem. I need to deal with it. The Holy Spirit and He only should control me.

STEP SIX

What is God saying through this Bible passage to your community of believers today?

Suppose someone in my community has a problem with wine or alcohol. It controls them so that they get drunk. Then Step 3 is relevant to them directly. Do not be drunk with wine but instead be filled with the Holy Spirit.

But wine is not the only, or most important problem that my community of believers have today. In the United States many things rather than the Holy Spirit may control my community. Among these are: marijuana (cannabis), pain-killing drugs, internet pornography (films about sex acts), weight-watching, internet games, exercise. The list goes on and on. There are lots of possibilities.

STEP SEVEN

How will you communicate the truths of this Bible passage to your community of believers?

To answer this question, it might be helpful to first think about the following questions in relationship to letters:

1. Do individuals in your community of believers ever receive personal letters? If yes, how often? If no, how do they receive personal communication (email, text, Facebook)? Do they share the contents of the letter/email/text with others in the community? If so, with whom? How do they think about these letters/emails/texts in relationship to their daily lives?

2. How does your community of believers think about personal letters/emails/texts in general? In other words, do they see them as bringing good news, bad news, or what?

3. How does your community of believers think about the letters that are found in the New Testament? Do they relate them to the personal letters/emails/texts that they sometimes receive? If so, how?

4. Can you remember a significant letter/email/text that an individual in your community received in the past 6 months? I mean one that had a great effect on the lives of several within the community. Describe the effect of this letter/email/text on the lives and worldview of your community of believers.

5. Think of stories especially in festivals, music, dramas, ceremonies, and dance, that are a part of your community's culture. Can you use any of these to relate the truths of this Bible passage?

6. What media from your culture (movie, TV show, song,) might help you communicate the truths of this Bible passage to your community?

For *my* community of American believers:

Believers in the United States are concerned about whether or not followers of Jesus can use marijuana (cannabis). Over the past several years, marijuana has been legal to use for medical reasons in several states in the USA. A few states have made the use of marijuana legal for anyone over the age of 21. Christians and churches in these states are trying to decide what is legally allowed and what is biblically allowed.

The general principle of this Ephesians 5:18 passage helps believers in the USA determine a biblical response to marijuana use. Any marijuana use causes the chemicals in it to control the person who uses it. So believers in Jesus should not use it (for recreational purposes). However some believers use it for pain relief. Perhaps they need to decide whether that is right or wrong on an individual basis.

For *your* community of believers:

You may have similar problems in your own community context involving problems such as marijuana use. Or it may be the use of illegal or legal drugs as a habit. Some may be addicts to pornography (books or films about naked people or sex acts), to exercising or diets. Or it could really be anything that controls the lives of believers rather than the Holy Spirit. Perhaps your culture has a traditional dance or song that shows the prob-

lems of being under the control of something. If so, by all means use it! You will want to discover in your own culture those ways that you might communicate the truths of the Ephesians 5:18 passage.

Conclusion

Good job! You are *doing* Bible interpretation! Now you are learning how to interpret the literary form of letter. You have followed the Reading Strategies of Steps 1-4 and the Relating Strategies of Steps 5-7. I have shown you how to read and relate letters both for yourself as well as for your community. You will get a chance to do that yourself in the section below, "Making the Bible *Come Alive!*"

Questions To Think About

1. Why is deciding where the context begins and ends so important with the literary form of letter?

2. How do you feel about the fact that the particular New Testament letter you are reading was not *originally* intended for you?

3. How does your own community of believers look at the literary form of letters in their own lives as well as in the New Testament?

Making the Bible *Come Alive!*

1. Read the words that Paul speaks to children and parents in his letter to the church at Ephesus found in Ephesians 6:1-4.

2. Do Bible interpretation on this letter by studying this passage. Do this by using the Reading Strategies of Steps 1-4 and the Relating Strategies of Steps 5-7. You will find these in Appendix A.

3. Don't forget to pray through each Step!

CHAPTER 15

How to Interpret Apocalyptic/Revelation

Introduction

Revelation refers both to the last book in the New Testament as well as to a literature form known as "apocalyptic." Apocalyptic literature is a revealing literature. It reveals, or makes known, especially those events that will happen at the end of time. The writer of apocalyptic literature is trying to reveal something that people do not yet know about. So the name of the last book of the New Testament is "The Revelation to John." Or "That which God's Spirit revealed to John."

Apocalyptic as a literature form is found in the Old Testament in parts of the books of Ezekiel, Daniel, Zechariah and Isaiah. In the New Testament we find apocalyptic mainly in the book of Revelation. It was a very popular literature form towards the end of the first century AD. This was around the time of the writing of the book of Revelation.

The literature form of apocalyptic is usually difficult to interpret and

the book of Revelation is an example. Many Christians love to try to interpret the imagery and symbols found in the book of Revelation. Sometimes they make interpretations which are very complicated! This is why it is important for you to know how to interpret apocalyptic literature, and the book of Revelation.

So let us look at how to interpret the book of Revelation!

Background

Four General Points about Apocalyptic Literature

Before we look at how to interpret the book of Revelation there are four general points to remember about apocalyptic literature:

1. **Apocalyptic Looks To the End of History.** The writers of apocalyptic literature have only one purpose. It is to tell their readers about the end times. In other words, the writers are concerned about what is going to happen at the very end of history. It is *about the future*.

2. **Apocalyptic Does not Care about Details and Precise Times.** The details and the times are not what is important in apocalyptic literature. The same is true with parables. What is important is this. Everything in them refers to the writer's understanding of the end of history. So *we need to be very careful* about not putting too much meaning into either the details or the times. The most important thing to remember is that the writer is trying to make some point about the end of history.

3. **Apocalyptic Has a Formal Style with Strong Clear Pictures in the Mind.** In apocalyptic literature writers refer to both time and events in small sections. Often there is a symbolic use of numbers. Apocalyptic also consists of strong and sometimes peculiar pictures of dreams and visions. These have hidden meanings and symbols. *In most cases we must not understand these literally.* Again, the writers of apocalyptic are not concerned about the details. They are concerned about making a point about the end of history.

4. **Apocalyptic Can Lead to Proof-Texting.** This was true for New Testament letters and is also true with apocalyptic lit-

erature. It often leads to having bits and pieces pulled out of context. Sometimes we use a sentence or phrase from the book of Revelation to support our own particular theological opinion. Or we use it to support our own ideas about the end of history. Again, this is "proof-texting." It is usually not a good practice for those who desire to be good Bible interpreters.

Background to the Book of Revelation

There are also four general points to remember when you try to interpret the book of Revelation:

1. **Author.** The title of the book is "The Revelation To (or For) John." Verse 1:1 speaks of "The revelation of Jesus Christ... made known...to his servant John." Most Bible scholars agree that these two things identify John as the human author. We think this John wrote the Gospel of John, as well as the three letters of John in the New Testament.

   John is now very old as he writes Revelation. Because of his Christian beliefs he has suffered persecution. He has been sent away from his country to the island of Patmos. (This is in the Mediterranean Sea near modern-day Turkey). He was not the only person who people persecuted. Towards the end of the first century AD, the ruling Roman government persecuted many Christians and churches.

2. **Revelation Is a Letter.** John writes the book of Revelation as a letter "to the seven churches that are in Asia" (Rev. 1:4). As a result, we must see all of the apocalyptic parts of Revelation in the context of the letter. John tells about the purpose of his letter to these seven churches. It is "to show his servants the things that must soon take place" (Rev. 1:1; also 22:6). Thus, John is using the literature form of apocalyptic to show these churches what the future will soon be. This is the specific occasion or reason why he wrote Revelation.

   As with the letters in Chapter 14, the letter of Revelation was not *originally* intended for other Christians to read. It was for those people in the seven churches. As a result, the specific issues that the letter deals with are usually not your specific issues. They are not those of your local community of believers.

You are reading somebody else's mail when you are reading Revelation. As a result, we must not be too concerned if we do not understand all the details and events in the book. We must be careful not to force John's words in Revelation to support our own theological opinion of the end times.

3. **Revelation Contains Prophecy.** From the very beginning of his letter, John makes clear that his letter is also prophecy. "Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy..." (Rev. 1:3). At the very end of the letter, John once again repeats the fact that it is prophecy. "Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book" (Rev. 22:7). As it is apocalyptic, any prophecy will be directed towards what is going to be happening at the end of history. However, as we already learned in Chapter 11, prophecy has both forth-telling and foretelling. Many who attempt to interpret Revelation forget these two parts of prophecy. As a result, they mainly stress the foretelling elements. But all foretelling comes out of forth-telling. We need to remember this when we try to interpret Revelation. It is a letter written to specific churches with a specific purpose. So any prophecy must come out of the challenge that John is giving to the seven churches.

4. **John's Concern.** John, when writing Revelation, has suffered persecution at the hands of the Roman government. He has been sent to the island of Patmos. Those in the seven churches have also suffered from persecution.

   John talks about this in Revelation 1:9: "I, John, am your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus. I was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the witness of Jesus." Here John mentions his own persecution as well as their persecution. "I am your brother and partner in the tribulation." By using the word "tribulation" here John is referring to their sufferings, difficulties and trials.

   John is challenging the believers in the seven churches to *persevere in the middle of the persecution*. He is also showing them that God's anger or judgment will soon happen to the persecutors. Through the apocalyptic mind picture John is showing that *God*

is in control of history. Those who are persecuted will indeed triumph in the end times if they remain faithful. John is showing the seven churches "what must soon take place" (Rev. 22:6). He reminds them that no matter what happens, Jesus is "coming soon" (Rev. 22:7). This is good news. There is *hope for all believers who remain faithful* to the end.

Whenever we look at apocalyptic literature, and especially Revelation, it is good to remember all of the background points. If we do this it will help us be better interpreters of both apocalyptic literature and of Revelation.

Let's now look at a specific example of how to interpret Revelation by looking at Revelation 7:9-12.

Studying Apocalyptic Literature: An Example from Revelation 7:9-12

I will take you through doing the "Seven Steps" and the Reading and Relating Strategies in order. I will do this as we examine the verses found in Revelation 7:9-12. These verses read:

> 9 'After this I looked, and there was a great crowd that no one could count. They came from every nation, from all tribes and people and languages. They were standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They wore white robes, with palm branches in their hands. 10 They cried out with a loud voice. "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" 11 And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God. 12 They said, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen." '

Reading Strategies

STEP ONE

What kind of literature form is this Bible passage and what are the effects of this?

The literature form found in Revelation 7:9-12 is apocalyptic. Thus, it is looking at the end of history using strong mind pic-

tures. It is a prophecy of the end of history with its foretelling or predicting of the future. This is based on forth-telling or challenging. At the same time these verses are found in the context of a letter to the seven churches. As a result, the situation that is affecting these seven churches may or may not be our same situation. We may need to look for the general principle (Step 4) of the verse in order for it to have meaning for us today.

STEP TWO

Where does the context of this Bible passage begin and end?

We find Revelation 7:9-12 in the context of the apocalyptic visions of the future that John has been seeing. These happened after he saw the open door in heaven (Rev. 4:1). John has already seen the throne of heaven (Rev. 4:2-11), the scroll and the Lamb (Rev. 5), the seven seals (Rev. 6), and the 144,000 of Israel sealed (Rev. 7:1-8). Now there is a nine-verse interval (Rev. 7:9-17) that speaks about a great crowd in white robes from every nation standing before the throne (Rev. 7:9-12). It then answers a question about this crowd (Rev. 7:13-17). Though 7:13-17 is a continuation of 7:9-12, I believe that we should interpret these nine verses separately. 7:9-12 speaks of what the great crowd is doing before the throne. 7:13-17 answers a question about this great crowd. They are two separate, though related, units. Revelation chapter 8 continues John's vision with the seventh seal and the seven trumpets.

STEP THREE

What was God saying through this Bible passage to the original audience back then?

God shows John "what must take place after this" (Rev. 4:1), both for himself as well as his audience. The audience is the seven churches. At the end of history there will be a countless number of people. They will be "from every nation, from all tribes and people and languages." They will experience persecutions, difficulties and trials. One day they will stand before God and praise both Him and Jesus (the Lamb). This is good news for the seven churches! They must continue in their faith in Jesus, although they have their problems and persecutions. Then they, too, will

one day stand at the end of history with this great crowd of other faithful Christians.

STEP FOUR

What is the general principle that God had in mind through this Bible passage for all people and all cultures?

The general principle here is good news for all faithful Christians, both then and now:

> All Christians who remain faithful although they have trials, difficulties and persecutions will one day have this experience. At the end, they will be with a crowd of other faithful Christians from every different race, tribe and culture. They will be praising God around the throne in heaven.

Relating Strategies

STEP FIVE

What is God saying through this Bible passage to you today?

Here once again Step 5 comes directly out of Steps 3 and 4. Thus, what God is saying to me is this. I must remain faithful to God although I may experience many trials or difficulties or persecutions. If I do, one day, at the end of history, I will be worshiping around the throne. I will be with a crowd of other faithful Christians from every race, tribe and culture.

STEP SIX

What is God saying through this Bible passage to your community of believers today?

Here once again Steps 5 and 6 will be very similar. Christians in my community who remain faithful, although they may experience persecution, can be confident of this. One day, at the end of history, they will be worshiping around the throne. They will be with a crowd of faithful Christians from every race, tribe and culture.

STEP SEVEN

How will you communicate the truths of this Bible passage to your community of believers?

In answering this question, it might be helpful to first think about the following questions:

1. What attitudes, if any, do your community of believers have toward apocalyptic literature, especially like that found in Revelation?

2. What does your community of believers think about the end times, or the end of history? Do they like to talk and study about the end times? Or are they really not very interested? Does their curiosity about the end times include both forth-telling and foretelling? Or is it mainly about foretelling?

3. Is your community of believers currently suffering any form of persecution, trial, or difficulty? Might this cause them to be tempted to turn away from their faith in Jesus?

4. Can you remember a persecution, trial, or difficulty in the past 6 months that an individual or individuals in your community experienced? Was it one that significantly affected the lives of several within the community? Describe the effect of this persecution/trial/difficulty on the lives and worldview of your community.

   Think about stories, especially in festivals, music, dramas, ceremonies, dance that are part of the culture of your community. Are there any you could use to relate the truths of this Bible passage?

5. What media from your culture (film, TV show, song,) might help you communicate the truths of this Bible passage to your community of believers?

For *my* community of American believers:

American Christians and churches have not suffered much real persecution throughout the history of the USA. Of course there have been times when Christians have suffered for their faith. But seldom have their very lives been put in danger. The persecution that they have received is really

minor. This is compared with the real persecution that many other believers in the worldwide Church have faced and are facing today. My community of believers tend to talk more about physical illnesses or financial problems as "trials" or "difficulties." While these trials and difficulties are very real to them, you cannot really compare them to real persecutions. Those are what the Christians in the seven churches in the book of Revelation suffered. Nor can you compare them to the persecution and suffering which many believers in the worldwide Church today have. But if my community of American believers are faithful to Jesus, they can be sure of this. Although they have trials and difficulties they will one day be worshiping around the throne. They will be with a crowd of other faithful Christians from every race, tribe and culture.

For *your* community of believers:

Your community of believers may indeed be experiencing persecutions, trials and difficulties. These may be like those experienced by the seven churches in Revelation. Although they may suffer persecutions, if they are faithful they will one day be in heaven. If so, then they will receive comfort and hope from this good news.

Conclusion

Good job! You are *doing* Bible interpretation! Now you are learning how to interpret the literary form of apocalyptic, especially the book of Revelation. You have closely followed the Reading Strategies of Steps 1-4 and the Relating Strategies of Steps 5-7. So now you know how to read and relate Revelation both for yourself as well as for your community of believers. You will get a chance to do that yourself in the section below, "Making the Bible *Come Alive!*"

Questions To Think About

1. Why is it so important to know some of the background information about apocalyptic literature? This is when you are interpreting the book of Revelation.

2. Why is it important to see that in Revelation—all prophecy about the future (foretelling) comes from John's challenge (forth-telling) to the churches? Why is the same true for other apocalyptic literature?

3. How does your own community of believers look at the literature form of apocalyptic in their own lives? This is as well as in the book of Revelation?

Making the Bible *Come Alive!*

1. Read the words of encouragement that John speaks to the seven churches about the end of history. These words are when he speaks of the Lamb who is worthy to open the scroll found in Revelation 5:1-14.

2. Do Bible interpretation on this letter by studying this passage. Follow the Reading Strategies of Steps 1-4 and the Relating Strategies of Steps 5-7. You will find these in Appendix A.

3. Don't forget to pray through each Step!

4. How will you communicate the truths of your favorite verse to the people in your Bible study or small group?

CONCLUSION

MAKING THE BIBLE *COME ALIVE!*

CONCLUSION

Making the Bible *Come Alive!*

Congratulations! You have worked very hard up to this point. Now you have learned how to better interpret the Bible. This is a wonderful thing! You will greatly strengthen your Christian life as you make the Bible *come alive* for yourself and for your people.

Here are eight final points to remember as you continue to do Bible interpretation:

ONE Let the Bible Always Take Priority Over the Culture

It does not matter what we think about the Bible passage, or what our culture thinks. We have to be true to what the Bible alone says. The Bible's opinion on things will always take priority over our own opinions, or our culture's opinions. The Bible is always the final authority.

This is sometimes difficult for us. We really want our people to accept the truths found in the Bible. At the same time, these biblical truths often speak against what our people or our culture, thinks. As a consequence, we are sometimes tempted to reduce the effect of the message of the Bible. Resist this temptation! For when we do not resist we take away from the very authority of the Bible itself.

The truths of the Bible are sometimes not pleasant for us, or our people, to hear. But we must always obey what the Bible says.

TWO Be Humble

We have had the tremendous privilege of learning how to better interpret the Bible for ourselves. Also we will help others to better interpret the Bible for themselves. As a result, we can either be proud about this privilege or be humble. If we choose to be proud we will probably do Bible interpretation alone, by ourselves. We will not help others in our Bible studies and small groups how to better interpret the Bible. We will think that we know more than our people and that our interpretations are always the best ones. If we choose to be humble we will do Bible interpretation in community with other believers. This is because we will have taught our people how to interpret the Bible for themselves. We will listen to our people, and to their interpretations. Together we will seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit by praying. So we will know how the Bible is speaking to our lives, both as individuals and as a group.

Humility and Bible interpretation must go together. We must be humble both before the biblical text as well as before our community of fellow believers.

THREE Rely On the Holy Spirit and Prayer

Humble followers of Jesus will naturally do this. We cannot do good Bible interpretation without relying upon the Holy Spirit and much prayer. In this book you have learned how to do Bible interpretation. But this alone will not be helpful for your own Christian life, and for the lives of those you teach. You must seek the help of the Holy Spirit in prayer.

All followers of Jesus must give attention to Paul's words: "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5:15). Good Bible interpretation will always demand this of us.

FOUR Teach Others How To Do Good Bible Interpretation

This point is especially important. Hopefully you did not read this book to learn how to understand the Bible better just for yourself. Rather, you read this book so that you can now help others to do good Bible interpretation for themselves. This is one of the main points of this book. It is to help you learn how to interpret the Bible better. So now you, in turn, can help your audience. This may be your community of believers, your church, your Bible study or small group. Help them to understand the Bible better and how to make use of it in their daily lives.

I believe that this agrees with Paul's words to his disciple, Timothy. He says: "What you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses pass on to faithful men [and women] who will be able to teach others also" (2 Tim. 2:2). Through this book I have had the privilege of teaching you so that you "will be able to teach others also." We all must pass on to others what we have received.

FIVE Remember that Bible Interpretation Is about Making Disciples

Remember, *making disciples* is what our most important ministry as followers of Jesus is all about! We want to learn how to interpret the Bible better and to help others to do the same. As a result we, and they, will become better disciples of Jesus Christ. At its center, good Bible interpretation is mission. It helps us, and our people, to become better equipped both to be a disciple as well as to make disciples.

While we want to become better interpreters of God's Word we must always remember this need to make disciples. Our Bible interpretation should result in better disciples of Jesus, as well as more disciples of Jesus. If it does not then we have failed to achieve the purpose of our Bible interpretation efforts.

SIX Give Yourself the Freedom To Make Mistakes

Of course all followers of Jesus should want to interpret the Bible correctly. But sometimes we do not always do this. This is where we need our community of believers. These are the people who have also been trained

in interpreting God's Word. They will help sharpen us as "iron sharpens iron" (Prov. 27:17). We may have made errors in our Bible interpretation. Or perhaps we have let our own opinion or our culture's opinion dominate. If others challenge us about this, we need to be humble before the text, admit our mistake and move on. We need to have this same attitude towards the people in our Bible studies and small groups. Our people may make mistakes in their own interpretations. We need to be gentle with them, correct them, and move on.

SEVEN Take Authority When Necessary

Very occasionally it might be necessary for us to say that a particular interpretation is not correct. The Bible is the ultimate final authority. You also, as someone now trained in Bible interpretation, may need to say that a particular interpretation is incorrect. This is especially important if it will lead individuals in your Bible study or small group into error. This will not happen very often, but if it does, it is your responsibility to take authority when necessary. Compare 1 Peter 5:1-3 as it affects leaders of Bible studies and small groups.

EIGHT Just Do It!

Just *do* Bible interpretation! It can be done! It is not as difficult as this book may have made it appear. I am confident that through prayer and the guidance of the Holy Spirit you will do very well in your interpretation of the Bible!

As I mentioned at the very beginning, this book will help make the Bible *come alive*. This will be true for your own lives. It will be true also for the lives of the people whom God has entrusted you with. May God continue to use you for His glory as you continue *doing* Bible interpretation!

APPENDIX

APPENDIX A

The Seven Steps

Found below are the seven steps of Bible interpretation. They use the Reading Strategies and Relating Strategies we used throughout this book. Follow these Seven Steps as you study any Bible passage.

Reading Strategies

STEP ONE	What kind of literature is this Bible passage and what are the effects of this?
STEP TWO	Where does the context of this Bible passage begin and end?
STEP THREE	What was God saying through this Bible passage to the original audience then?
STEP FOUR	What is the general principle that God intended through this Bible passage for all people and all cultures?

Relating Strategies

STEP FIVE	What is God saying through this Bible passage to you today?
STEP SIX	What is God saying through this Bible passage to your community of believers today?
STEP SEVEN	How will you communicate the truths of this Bible passage to your community of believers?

APPENDIX B

For Further Reading

There are literally hundreds of "how to" books on Bible interpretation, many of which have been published over the last few decades. Here are three books that I have found most helpful. I have listed them in their order of difficulty.

1. **How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth**, by Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart. Fourth edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 301 pages. This book, by far, is the best basic book for any reader who wants greater detail about the various literature forms found in the Bible. I have used this book for many years in my own classes on Bible interpretation.

2. **Grasping God's Word. A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting and Applying the Bible**, by J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays. Third edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 506 pages. This book is designed for the serious reader (especially college and beginning seminary students) who wants to understand God's Word better and is willing to work hard at it. There is also a helpful companion *Workbook*.

3. **Invitation to Biblical Interpretation. Exploring the Hermeneutical Triad of History, Literature, and Theology**, by Andreas J. Kostenberger and Richard D. Patterson (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2011), 891 pages. This book is for the advanced reader (seminary student) who desires to see the "big picture" of Bible interpretation. This picture involves history, literature and theology. This book was recently made more "user friendly" with a shorter version with the title, **For the Love of God's Word. An Introduction to Biblical Interpretation,** by Andreas J. Kostenberger and Richard D. Patterson (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2015), 444 pages.

About the Author

Larry Caldwell, and his wife Mary, lived in Asia off and on for thirty years, with over twenty of those years in Manila, Philippines as missionaries with Converge Worldwide (formerly Baptist General Conference). In Manila Larry was Professor of Missions and Bible Interpretation at Asian Theological Seminary; he also served as Academic Dean for five years. In addition, he edited the Journal of Asian Mission as well as directed the Doctor of Missiology (D.Miss.) Program of the Asia Graduate School of Theology.

In 2011 Larry and Mary returned to the USA where Larry became the Director of Training and Strategy for Converge Worldwide, as well as (in 2015) Chief Academic Officer and Dean, and Professor of Intercultural Studies, at Sioux Falls Seminary, located in Sioux Falls, SD. Larry continues to teach regularly on contextualization and cross-cultural, multi-cultural and multi-generational Bible interpretation (ethnohermeneutics) at seminaries and training institutions in the United States, the Philippines, Pakistan, India and Brazil. Larry has published several books as well as dozens of articles found in many Western and Asian academic journals. In addition he has presented academic papers at missiological and theological meetings in both Asia and the United States.

Larry is an avid runner. He also enjoys biking, cross-country skiing, golfing and snowshoeing. Larry and Mary have four adult children and two grandchildren.

A link to some of Larry's other writings can be found at:

https://sfseminary.edu/larrycaldwell/

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