









TOYOTA

buyatoyota.cc

DETAILS

[Report Inappropriate Ad](#)

[HOME](#) » [CORE FAITH: UNDERSTANDING THE ESSENTIALS OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE](#)

FROM THE SERIES: [CORE FAITH: UNDERSTANDING THE ESSENTIALS OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE](#) [← PREVIOUS PAGE](#) | [NEXT PAGE →](#)

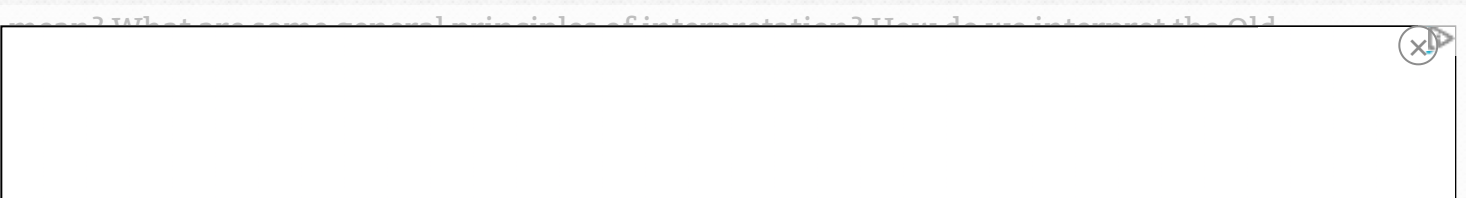
# Lesson 6: Principles of Biblical Interpretation

*As a Protestant I cherish the NT teaching on the priesthood of believers—that each Christian has the right to his own interpretation, but also that each Christian has the responsibility to get it right. —Daniel Wallace*

## Introduction

When it comes to making claims about what the Bible means, sometimes we hear comments from Christians or non-Christians like the following: “Well, that’s just your interpretation.” “The Bible can be made to say anything you want.” “You can’t really understand the Bible. It is full of contradictions.” “No one can understand the true meaning of *anything anyone* says.” Or, someone sitting in a Bible study might say, “This is what the Bible means to me.” All of these types of comments are about principles of biblical interpretation also called in theological jargon *hermeneutics*. Welcome to our postmodern world. Pilate’s question lives on: “What is truth? ( [John 18:38](#)).”

Some issues that we as Christians face regarding the topic of biblical interpretation include: How does divine inspiration and human authorship affect biblical interpretation? What does a text



## What Does a Text Mean?

The last lesson looked at the topic of inspiration and found that the Bible is both a human book and a divine book. There are certain implications of this for biblical interpretation. The first is that the human authors had a specific historical audience, context and purpose. These authors used their own language, writing methods, style of writing and literary form of writing. The divine authorship of the Bible gives it its unity and the ultimate source of all interpretation is from God. In the book of Genesis Joseph was asked about the meaning of some divinely given dreams and he replied, “Don’t interpretations belong to God? ([Gen 40:8](#)).

So let’s just start with the most basic question. What does a text mean? The answer to this question is that *a text means what the author intended it to mean*. If there is only one thing you learn from this lesson this is it. For a simple example, if you wrote a letter with some statements in it that are a little ambiguous, then what does the letter mean? Does it mean what you intended it to mean or how the readers interpret it? Of course it means what you intended it to mean. The true meaning of a text resides in the authorial intent of the text. This leads us to the first primary and fundamental principle of interpreting the Bible.

### General Principles of Biblical Interpretation

**Principle 1:** *Interpretation must be based on the author’s intention of meaning and not the reader.* This means we must get into the author’s context, historically, grammatically, culturally and the literary forms and conventions the author was working in. To be able to do this some good Bible study tools are needed since we are 2000 years or more removed from the biblical authors and their context is very different than ours. The first tool that any one should get is a good study Bible with notes that explain historical and cultural background information. Most major Bible translations come in editions with these types of notes but by far the NET Bible with its over 60,000 notes surpasses them all. Get the most extensive Study Bible that goes with the translation you use. After this, good evangelical commentaries are essential tools to study the Bible but make sure to look at a couple to get a variety of perspectives. When someone in a Bible study states what the verse means to him, we need to redirect and clarify that the meaning is what the author intended. After that the question then is how that historical meaning applies to us today. The second principle of biblical interpretation should also be considered foundational.

**Principle 2:** *Interpretations must be done in the context of the passage.* What does the following mean? “It was a ball.” Well, the answer depends on the context. Consider the following sentences: The baseball umpire saw the pitch drift to the outside and said, “it was a ball.” We went to the dance last night, in fact it was so formal “it was a ball.” As I was walking along the golf course I spotted ⊗ something small and white in the tall grass, “it was a ball.” I had so much fun at the game night, “it was a ball.” In each case the word *ball* means something different. Therefore, *context determines*

*meaning!* The nearest context must be given the most weight in interpretation. First, there is the near context of the sentence, then the paragraph, then the section and then the book and even author. The interpreter should look at all these circles of context to be able to correctly assess the meaning.

Far too often people try to interpret a verse by itself in isolation without looking at the context itself. For example, consider the verse [Revelation 3:20](#) which is sometimes used as an illustration for evangelism. Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me ([Rev 3:20](#); NASB).<sup>1</sup> If this is all you looked at, it would be easy to understand the verse in terms of someone asking Jesus into his or her life for the first time. But the context in the preceding verse (v. 19) is talking about discipline of those whom Jesus loves, which would most naturally refer to believers. Also, in looking at the larger paragraph the passage is to a church

([Rev 3:14, 22](#)). The verse is really addressed to believers who need to repent from their sin and return to fellowship with God.

**Principle 3:** *Interpret the Bible literally (or normally) allowing for normal use of figurative language.* Take the plain meaning of the text at face value. When the literal does not make sense you probably have a figure of speech. For example, [Isaiah 55:12](#) states the trees of the field will clap their hands. Since trees do not have hands or clap this must be a figure of speech. Look for words such as “like” or “as” which can also communicate a figure of speech. Figures of speech and illustrations give the Bible a powerful and colorful means of expression. They are an important part of the normal expression of language.

**Principle 4:** *Use the Bible to help interpret itself.* Interpret difficult passages with clear ones. This is sometimes called the law of non-contradiction. Because the Bible is God’s word, and God is true, the Bible will not contradict itself. For example, there are clear passages that teach the doctrine of eternal security, that once a person is truly saved he or she cannot lose salvation ([John 5](#); [Rom 8](#)).

Some passages in the Bible are very hard to interpret like [Hebrews 6:4-6](#).<sup>2</sup> So I would let the overall and clear theology of the Bible influence me that a very hard passage like [Hebrews 6](#) is not teaching that someone can lose his salvation. Also, use the New Testament to help interpret the Old Testament. This recognizes the progressive nature of revelation, that is the Bible is giving more revelation on topics over time. But one must start by interpreting the Old Testament text in its context before a New Testament consideration is made.



**Principle 5:** *Interpretation must be distinguished from application.* While there is one interpretation that is historical, there are many applications that can be carried over to our modern context. Build an application bridge from the interpretation to the timeless principle and then to the application now. For example in [John 12](#), Mary anoints Jesus with very expensive oil. The historical context records a historical event. The interpretation relates only to what Mary did to Jesus. What about us today? An application might be that we are willing to give sacrificially for the Lord's work and give Jesus acts of worship as Mary did. Or when Jesus states the principle in [Matt 7](#) to love one's enemies it is a general command that I might apply specifically by loving a worker who undermines me or a neighbor who offends me.

**Principle 6:** *Be sensitive to distinctions between Israel and the church and Old Covenant and New Covenant eras/requirements.* Promises made to Israel in the Old Testament cannot automatically be transferred to the church in which we are a part. For example, the land promises were given to Abraham and his descendants ([Gen 12:7](#)) but that does not include me, a Gentile Christian.

Christians are not under the requirements of the Mosaic law ([Rom 6:14](#)). For example, in [Lev 19:19](#) there is a command "you must not wear a garment made of two different kinds of fabric." This was a binding command under the Mosaic law but not under the terms of the New Covenant. It is true that certain Old Testament commands repeated in the New Testament are still binding, but this is made clear by their repetition in the New Testament. The church was formed in [Acts 2](#) with the descent of the Holy Spirit and most direct statements to and about the church occur after that. Also, there is a future for national Israel (cf. [Rom 11](#)) in which many Old Testament promises will yet be fulfilled and certain practices of the church age will come to an end at the second coming of Jesus (such as the Lord's supper [1 Cor 11:26](#)).

**Principle 7:** *Be sensitive to the type of literature you are in.* The Bible contains many different types of literature: law, narrative, wisdom, poetry, gospel, parable, epistle, and apocalyptic. Each of these types of literature has specific features that must be considered when interpreting a text. Some of these will be examined in the next section. For now we need to understand that where we are in the Bible makes a big difference on how we interpret and apply it.

## Interpreting the Old Testament

**Narrative Literature:** Much of the Old Testament contains narrative literature. First, the passage needs to be interpreted in its historical context and then applications can be drawn from the characters and events. In the book of Judges, only one verse is given to the judge Shamgar. It reads,

“After Ehud came Shamgar son of Anath; he killed six hundred Philistines with an oxgoad<sup>3</sup> and he too delivered Israel” ([Judges 3:31](#)). Why did God include this passage? Yes, it records an historical event. Also, the verse teaches God’s delivering power can come in an unexpected way, not with a mighty army but with one man wielding an oxgoad.

**Law:** Realize that Christians are not under the law as a legal system ([Rom 6:14](#)) but that we are to fulfill the principles that stand behind the law of loving God and loving one’s neighbor (cf. [Matt 22:37-40](#))? Sometimes the teaching is carried directly into the New Testament (e.g., Do not murder, etc). Other times, the New Testament takes a text and applies a principle from it. For example, “You must not muzzle your ox when it is treading grain” ([Deut 25:4](#)). Paul takes this verse, which refers to feeding a work animal and applies the principle of the Christian worker being worthy of tangible support. Paul states, “Elders who provide effective leadership must be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard in speaking and teaching. For the scripture says, ‘*Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain,*’ and, ‘The worker deserves his pay’” ([1 Tim 5:17-18](#), cf. [1 Cor 9:9](#)). In general, if the Old Testament command in the law is not repeated in the New Testament, look for the principle behind the statement in the law and then try to apply that.

**Wisdom Literature:** Realize that much of the proverbial type of wisdom in the Old Testament is general truth based on observations but not absolute truths or promises. Two good examples are seen in the following: “A gentle response turns away anger, but a harsh word stirs up wrath” ([Prov 15:1](#)). Another one is, “Train a child in the way that he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it” ([Prov 22:6](#)). Christians should not take these types of proverbial statements as promises of what will always happen but rather patterns that are generally true outcomes based on observation. A gentle answer will not always prevent an angry outburst but it is much more likely to than a harsh one. Christian parents who have a child who has gone astray from the faith may have done their best to train the child the right way but the child did not take it.

**Poetry:** Realize that poetry often has a greater use of figurate language than narrative or law. Also, Hebrew poetry’s main characteristic is parallelism. For example, [Psalm 24](#) says, “The Lord owns the earth and all it contains, the world and all who live in it. For he set its foundation upon the seas, and established it upon the ocean currents. Who is allowed to ascend the mountain of the Lord? Who

may go up to his holy dwelling place?” (Ps 24:1-3). Here we have three sets of pairs in side by side fashion with the second reference restating the basic idea of the first. The phrase “the earth and all it contains” is amplified by the phrase “the world and all who live in it”. The phrase “he sets its foundation upon the seas” is rephrased “established it upon the ocean currents.” The question of who is allowed to ascend to the mountain of the Lord is restated “Who may go up to his Holy Dwelling place?” Most English Bible translations will format poetry using indentation, which helps show the parallel ideas.

## Interpreting the New Testament

**Gospels:** Understand that each writer has a *specific audience* for whom he is writing, and that he has selected his material for them. Matthew was written for a Jewish audience. Mark was written for a Roman audience. Luke was written for a Greek audience. John was written for a universal or Gentile audience. This can help us see nuances or explain differences between accounts. For example, in [Matthew 19:1-12](#) and [Mark 10:1-12](#) Jesus teaches on the hard topic of divorce. Both gospels state that a man who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her. Mark alone though adds the point that if a woman divorces her husband and marries another she commits adultery against him. Why is this difference there? It probably has to do with the audience. Matthew is writing to a Jewish culture in which a woman could not divorce her husband while Mark is writing to a Roman audience in which one could.

Read the gospels not only *vertically*, that is, understanding what is said in each individual account, but also *horizontally*, that is, considering why one account follows another. For example, see [Mark 2-3:6](#); what do these various accounts have in common? One can notice that they are all different stories that relate to the conflict that Jesus had with the Jewish leadership. [Mark 3:6](#) reads, “So the Pharisees went out immediately and began plotting with the Herodians as to how they could assassinate him.” The stories are grouped in a way that gives an explanation as to why Jesus was rejected as strongly as he was.

Lastly, recognize that the gospels are in a transitional stage between Old and New Covenants. Jesus lived in the context of Judaism prior to the birth of the church. For example, Jesus is keeping the Old Testament prescribed feasts in many of his journeys to Jerusalem. Also, he is introducing changes that will be inaugurated with the start of the New Covenant. For example, in [Mark 7](#) Jesus declared

all foods clean which was a change from the Old Testament dietary laws.<sup>4</sup>



**Parables.**<sup>5</sup> Parables are a form of figurative speech. They are stories that are used to illustrate a truth. There are parables in different parts of the Bible but Jesus was the master of them and many are found in the gospels (e.g., [Matt 13](#), [Mark 4](#), [Luke 15](#)). How then should we interpret the parables? *First, determine the context that prompted the parable.* Parables always arise out of a context. For example the Pharisees disdain for Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners prompts Jesus to tell a parable about how God loves a lost sinner who repents ([Luke 15](#)). *Second, understand the story's natural meaning which is often taken from real life situations in first century Palestine.* *Third, ascertain the main point or truth the parable is trying to give and focus on this.* Only interpret the details of the parables if they can be validated from the passage. Many details are there only for the setting of the story. For example, what is the main point of the mustard seed parable? Jesus stated: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. It is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest garden plant and becomes a tree, so that the wild birds come and nest in its branches” ([Matt 13:31-32](#)). The parable is an illustration of the kingdom of heaven which starts small but grows to be very large in size. This seems to be the main point. The birds and the branches are probably there only to illustrate how large the tree has become.

**Acts.** Recognize that Acts is a theologized history of the early church. Acts tells what the church was doing from the human side of things and what God was doing from the divine side of things. For example, consider these passages on the early growth of the church which refer to the same event but from two different perspectives. “So those who accepted his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand people were added” . . . ([Acts 2:41](#)) “And the Lord was adding to their number everyday those who were being saved” ([Acts 2:47](#)). Here we see what God is doing in and through the church. Also, we need to recognize that the church starts in [Acts 2](#) with the baptism of the Holy Spirit. The baptism of the Spirit, the filling of the Spirit, church planting and gospel outreach characterize the events of the book. In addition, some events in Acts are descriptive of what happened not proscriptive of what is necessarily expected in the modern church. For example, Samaritan believers did not receive the Holy Spirit in [Acts 8](#) upon faith in Jesus. They had to wait for Peter and John to get there. When Paul was bitten by a viper in Malta, yet he miraculously lived ([Acts 28:1-5](#)). These are descriptions of what happened and are not necessarily normative of what happens in the church today. So it probably would not be a good idea to start snake handling services!

The book of Acts is also a book of transitions. First there are key transitions in biography. This is especially true as the book focuses more on the ministry of Peter in the first portions of the book then shifts to Paul. There is also a transition in ministry focus from the Jews to the Samaritans and to the Gentiles. Lastly there is a geographical transition starting in Jerusalem taking the gospel outward into Samaria, Asia Minor, Europe and eventually Rome. In [Acts 1:8](#) Luke gives us a rough outline of the progression emphasizing the progress of the gospel. “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the farthest parts of the earth.”

**Epistles.** Since the New Testament epistles are directed to churches and individuals in the church, they most directly apply to us today. Most commands given in the epistles are general enough in nature that we need to obey them, or in the case of promises we can claim them. For example in [1 Corinthians 15](#) there is a promise given for immortal bodies and eventual victory over death.

These promises are not just for those in the local Corinthian church but the universal church of God.

In the epistles, pay special attention to logical connectors/conjunctions to explore relationships of clauses and sentences. Look for these types of words: “for,” “therefore,” “but,” etc. For example [Hebrews 12:1](#) reads, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, we must get rid of every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and run with endurance the race set out for us.” The word *therefore* points back to the previous chapter in which Old Testament saints were held up as people who had given a good testimony or witness of faith. The phrase “cloud of witnesses” then would naturally refer back to the people of the preceding chapter. In another example the author of Hebrews writes, “So since we are receiving an unshakable kingdom, let us give thanks, and through this let us offer worship pleasing to God in devotion and awe. For our God is indeed a devouring fire” ([Heb 12:28-29](#)). Here the word *for* sets up a subordinate idea giving the reason we as Christians should offer worship in devotion and awe to God.

**Revelation.** Revelation is the one book in the New Testament that is one of the hardest to interpret. There are several reasons for this. First, there are substantially different interpretative approaches on the overall timing of the book. Some see most of it as purely historical. Some see most of it as yet future. Second, there are many Old Testament allusions in Revelation. Allusions are phrases and references to the Old Testament without an explicit statement by John that he is quoting the Old Testament. So when John refers to the Old Testament he generally does not tell you he is doing so. Third, there is a greater use of symbolic language in Revelation than in other parts of the Bible. (X)

Revelation is in a form of literature known as apocalyptic.<sup>6</sup>




How can one get started? First, the book of Revelation promises a blessing to the one who reads it ([Rev 1:3](#)). So we should read it even if we do not completely understand everything. The basic thrust of Revelation's message is clear. Jesus is coming again and will defeat the forces of evil. We can be assured of this. Other interpretative helps that can be given would be to interpret the seven churches as seven historical churches in existence in the first century A.D ([Rev 2-3](#)). Interpret chapter 4 onward as primarily future events from our perspective ([Rev 1:18-19](#)).<sup>7</sup> Follow a generally chronological view of the book from chapter 4 sequencing the bowls, trumpets and seals, second coming of Jesus, millennial kingdom and eternal state. Use a study Bible with a good set of notes to help frame common interpretations and Old Testament backgrounds. Lastly, become a student of the book and keep working at it.

## Conclusion and Summary

Biblical passages must be interpreted according to the intention of the author and in the context in which the statement is made. Interpretation must be distinguished from application. One must be sensitive to what type of literature one is in and how this may or may not apply to a believer in the church age. Interpreting the Bible is sometimes hard work but it's always worth the cost. David reminds us of the value of God's word, "They are of greater value than gold, than even a great amount of pure gold; they bring greater delight than honey, than even the sweetest honey from a honeycomb" ([Ps 19:10](#)).

## Discussion Questions

1. What types of interpretations have you heard where you questioned the method of interpretation?
2. What would happen to interpretation if the church used reader centered interpretations as opposed to an author centered interpretations?
3. How does the Holy Spirit help us in interpreting the Bible ([1 Cor 2](#))?
4. If the Holy Spirit is guiding us in interpretation why do godly Christians have differing interpretations on various passages?
5. What is our relationship, if any, to the Old Testament Commandments/Law?
6. Why are only 9 of the 10 commandments repeated in the New Testament? The Sabbath command is the one of the ten commandments that is not there. 
7. How does the distinction between the church and Israel affect application of the Old Testament?

8. How do you know if something is symbolic or not?

---

**1** The NET Bible gives a translation rendering that helps to alleviate this confusion. **“Listen! I am standing at the door and knocking! If anyone hears my voice and opens the door I will come into his home and share a meal with him, and he with me” (Rev 3:20).**

**2** “For it is impossible in the case of those who have once been enlightened, tasted the heavenly gift, become partakers of the Holy Spirit,<sup>5</sup> tasted the good word of God and the miracles of the coming age,<sup>6</sup> and then have committed apostasy, to renew them again to repentance, since they are crucifying the Son of God for themselves all over again and holding him up to contempt (Heb 6:4-6 NET).


**3** An oxgoad is simply a long stick with a pointed end that was used to prod animals into walking.

**4** He [Jesus] said to them, "Are you so foolish? Don't you understand that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him?<sup>19</sup> For it does not enter his heart but his stomach, and then goes out into the sewer." (This means all foods are clean.)(Mark 7:18-19 NET).

**5** Adapted from Roy Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation* (Colorado Springs: Victor, 1991) 194-226.

**6** A scholarly definition of Apocalyptic: “a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another supernatural world” J.J. Collins “Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre,” *Semeia* 14 (1979), 9. Revelation focuses on the future and spiritual world to a much greater degree than other portions of the New Testament and it is communicated in visions and symbolic language.

**7** Revelation 1:19 gives a basic chronological outline of the book. “Therefore write what you saw,

what is, and what will be after these things” (Rev 1:19 NET). (past: what you saw (Chapter 1:9-20); present: what is (Chapters 2-3); and future: what will take place after these things (Chapters 4-22:5).

Related Topics: [Basics for Christians](#), [Bible Study Methods](#), [Bibliology \(The Written Word\)](#),

[Christian Life](#), [Hermeneutics](#)



[Report Inappropriate Ad](#)

