

Chapter One.

The What and Why of Bible Interpretation

A businessman was on a trip quite a distance from his hometown. A bachelor, he served as a top executive in a leading governmental agency. In fact he was the finance officer in charge of all the funds in that department.

Returning home from Palestine, he was on a desert road southwest of Jerusalem. Another person was driving, which gave him opportunity to read. As he was reading aloud, he looked up and saw a man who had come up beside him and had heard him reading. The man asked the vacationer if he understood what was being read.

The reader was an Ethiopian, a court official of Candace, Queen of Ethiopia (Acts 8:27). On his way back to Ethiopia, he was joined by Philip, whom God told to meet the official (vv. 26-29). Philip struck up a conversation with the man by asking him a question—a question of Bible interpretation. "Do you understand what you are reading?" (v. 30) The finance officer responded, "How can I... unless someone explains it to me?" (v. 31) Inviting Philip to join him in the chariot, the African asked if the Prophet Isaiah in Isaiah 53:7-8 was speaking about himself or someone else. His question revealed his need for help in interpreting the passage. Philip explained that the passage refers to Jesus. As a result of the conversation the African accepted the Lord as his Saviour.

This desert dialogue points up two things. First, seeing the words on a page of the Bible does not necessarily mean that the reader catches their meaning. Observing what the Bible says is the first of several steps in Bible study. It is important to know what the text actually states. But this may sometimes lead to questions on the meaning of what is read. Many people, on reading portions of the Bible, come away confused about their meaning or come away with a false understanding.

Second, the evangelist-eunuch incident reveals that proper guidance can help others interpret what they read in the Bible. Philip's question, "Do you understand what you are reading?" implied that the reader probably did not understand but that it was possible to understand. In fact the treasurer's request for someone to explain the passage to him was an admission on his part that he could not properly understand the passage by himself and that he felt the need for help in interpretation.

Several months after Nehemiah completed the rebuilding of the Jerusalem walls and the Israelites had settled in their towns, Ezra the scribe read to them from "the Book of the Law of Moses" (the first five books of the Bible) as the people were assembled before the Water Gate at Jerusalem (Neh. 8:1). Ezra read from the Law from daybreak till noon (v. 3). The Levites also read aloud from the Law, "making it clear and giving the meaning so that people could understand what was being read" (vv. 7-8). As a result the people were joyful "because they now understood the words" (v. 12).

Why Is Bible Interpretation Important?

It Is Essential for Understanding and Teaching the Bible Properly

We must know the meaning of the Bible before we can know its message for today. We must understand its sense for then before we can see its significance for now. Without hermeneutics (the science and art of interpreting the Bible) we are jumping over and missing out on an indispensable step in Bible study. The first step, observation, asks, What does it say? The second step, interpretation, asks the question, What does it mean? The third step, application, raises the question, How does it apply to me?

Interpretation is perhaps the most difficult and time-consuming of these three steps. And yet cutting Bible study short in this area can lead to serious errors and faulty results. Some people knowingly "distort the Word of God" (2 Cor. 4:2). Some even

"distort" the Scriptures "to their own destruction" (2 Peter 3:16). Others unknowingly come away from the Bible with faulty interpretations. Why? Because of inadequate attention to the principles involved in understanding the Scriptures. In recent years we have seen a great surge of interest in informal Bible study. Many small groups meet weekly in homes or in churches to discuss the Bible—what it means and how it applies. Do people in those groups always come away with the same understanding of the passage studied? Not necessarily. Some may say, "To me this verse means this," and another person in the group may respond, "To me the verse doesn't mean that; it means this." Studying the Bible in this way, without proper hermeneutical guidelines, can lead to confusion and interpretations that are even in direct conflict.

Did God intend for the Bible to be treated in this way? If it can be made to mean anything we want, how can it be a reliable guide?

Conflicting interpretations of many passages abound. For example, one person reads John 10:28, "I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of My hand," and understands that verse to be teaching eternal security. Others read the same verse and explain that though no one can snatch a Christian out of God's hand, the believer may remove himself from God's hand by persistent sin. Some people suggest that Paul's statement in Colossians 1:15 that Christ is "the Firstborn over all creation" means He was created. Others understand the verse to be saying that like a firstborn son in a family He is the Heir. Some Christians practice so-called speaking in tongues, based on 1 Corinthians 12-14. Others read the same chapters and understand that this practice was only for the Apostolic Age and not for today. Some have read Nahum 2:4, "The chariots storm through the streets, rushing back and forth through the squares," and have concluded that this verse was prophesying heavy automobile traffic in our cities today. In the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), some have sought

to give a "spiritual" meaning to the passage by explaining that the inn to which the Samaritan took the injured man represents the church and that the two silver coins given to the innkeeper represent the two ordinances of the Lord's Supper and water baptism.

The Mormon leader Brigham Young justified his having more than 30 wives by pointing to the fact that Abraham had more than 1 wife, namely, Sarah and Hagar. The Mormon practice of being baptized for dead relatives and others is based, they argue, on 1 Corinthians 15:29. Some people handle poisonous snakes, based on their reading of Mark 16:18. Whether women should teach men is based on how one interprets 1 Corinthians 11:5; 14:34-35; and 1 Timothy 2:12. Some teach that Christ's present reign in heaven means He will not establish a 1,000-year reign on the earth after His return. Others, however, say the Bible teaches that Christ, though reigning over the universe now, will manifest His kingdom in a physical way when He rules as the Messiah over the nation Israel on the earth in the Millennium.

All these—and many others—are matters of interpretation. Obviously these various conflicting views point up that not all readers are following the same principles for understanding the Bible.

The lack of proper hermeneutics has also led to the Bible being highly abused and maligned. Even some atheists seek to support their position by referring to Psalm 14:1, "There is no God." Obviously they are overlooking how those words are introduced: "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.'" "You can make the Bible say anything you want," some argue. And yet how many of the same people say, "You can make Shakespeare say anything you want"? Of course it is true that people can make the Bible say anything they wish so long as they disregard normal approaches for understanding written documents.

Bible Interpretation Is Essential as a Step beyond Observation