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The Value of Interpretation

Lesson 15

So finally we've finished our first step in learning how to study the Bible, which was what?

Observation!

And observation asks the question: What do I see?

So now we move to the second step, which is Interpretation. And what is interpretation? Well, interpretation in its simplest terms is understanding what the text means.

And just like observation is required for proper interpretation, interpretation is important, because we can't properly apply the Word of God until we understand it. And the better we understand it, the better we can apply it. The better we observe, the better our interpretation and the better our interpretation, the better our application.

That's why David prayed in **Psalm 119:34**, "**Give me understanding, and I will keep your law and obey it with all my heart.**"

In other words, acting on what God has said, assumes that you understand what He has said.

Most of you probably remember the story in Acts 8 where Philip, an evangelist, the Billy Graham of his day if you will. He was holding revivals and preaching the gospel in Samaria, and there was great response and

people were getting saved and lives were being changed. And then one day the Spirit of God in verse 26 I believe it was, told him to, “Go south on the road—the desert road—from Jerusalem to Gaza”.

And though he could have argued, he didn't, he obeyed! He heads south, and en route he meets a man; the Ethiopian eunuch. Actually, he is the secretary of the treasury for his country. And they get involved in this conversation and it turns out this government official has been reading a certain passage of Scripture.

And so Philip asks him, “Do you understand what you are reading?”

Well, the man could have gotten upset at that question I guess if he had taken it the wrong way or if Phillip had asked it the wrong way, but he didn't. He just humbly replied, **“Well, how could I, unless someone guides me?”**.

And so here is this man and he has a copy of the Scriptures, and he's an intelligent man by all accounts, but he needs help in understanding what he's reading. In other words, he needs help in this process of Interpretation.

And so he asks in **verse 34: “Tell me please, who is the prophet talking about? Himself, or someone else?”**

So Philip helped the man gain insight into what the text meant. And after he understood it, then he was able to respond in faith. And in verse 39 it says he went home **“rejoicing.”**

And so in a real sense, the step of Interpretation, not only lead this man to Christ, but it also helped to eventually spread the gospel to Africa. And so how we interpret the Bible and this step of interpretation is very important.

When, I was first saved and called to preach, God made a way for me to learn this truth in a rather unique way.

I was praying and seeking God as to where He wanted me to get started in this process and what exactly he wanted me to do. And in a rather unusual way, He lead us to this very small Bible church in Hueytown not far from where we lived.

And I know I've told this story several times before, but for those who may have never heard it, I'll tell not again, because what God did in my life during this time, shaped how I personally value and view the word of God today.

When I was saved and called to preach, I was still working in the coal mine. But after that supernatural encounter with God on the side of the road on my way to work, it was now my heart's desire to learn all I could about Him and His word and also to teach and preach to others.

Now, I certainly didn't know how to preach at the time and some people would probably say I've not come very far since that time, but still I had this deep down burning desire to preach. And so I was praying that God would open that door.

Well, He did open it, but as always, He did it in a way that I could have never even dreamed up.

One Sunday morning, I was on my way home from work in the coal mines, and I was coming through Hueytown on my way to Pleasant Grove, and those of you who are familiar with that area know there used to be a little brick church on Forest Road that sat back off the road, on top of the hill on the edge of town. And everyday I would pass this church coming and going, but I never not one time saw anybody there.

Well, I began to think, I wonder if this church is even open?

And so I kept noticing it on the way to work and back home and it was like God just kept putting it on my heart to stop. And so one Sunday

morning, I had just finished working Owl Shift, and I was on my way home and when I started to pass this little church, I decided this time to pull up the hill and into the parking lot. And while I was sitting there and praying to God and asking Him what this was all about and why He kept putting this church on my heart, a little red car drove up.

And out it, crawls this much older gentleman, and he's all dressed up in a black suit and a white shirt and a tie. And he has a Bible in his hand and he walks over to my truck and he says, Can I help you?

Well, I tried to explain to him that I didn't really know why I was there, but that I had just recently been saved, and felt that God was calling me to preach, and that I worked in the coal mine and drove by here all the time on the way to work and home, but that I never saw anybody here and I was really thinking the church was closed. And so God had just put it in my heart to stop and to pray and I don't even know what I'm supposed to be praying for.

And so with that rather odd explanation from me, he said, well, my name is Dr. Leon Gillaspie and I'm the pastor here. He said, well actually I'm the interim pastor here, but I've been the interim pastor here for seven years.

And then he said, and we do have services here, every Sunday morning and every Sunday night. And he said, we don't have but just a few members and we're all old and so we're in and out in less than hour, but you'd sure be welcome to come join us.

And with that we shook hands and I left.

Well, when I got home, Trish was getting ready to go to the Pentecostal Church where she had been going for sometime, before I was saved. And when I got home, I told her; I said, I've found us a church! And then I told

her about the little preacher I had met and the little church on the hill and I said, we're going to go visit this morning.

Now, she doesn't really like change; and she sure doesn't like meeting new people and so she wasn't really all excited about this new adventure, but I was. And when we walked in and she looked around and saw that we were the youth group of the bunch, she really wasn't excited.

At any rate, the people were friendly and the singing, well, that's another story I won't even take the time to tell tonight. But when Brother Gillaspie got up to preach or to teach, now that was an experience I'll always cherish.

He would open his Bible, and verse by verse, with not one note in sight, he would read and explain in the simplest terms, what **God meant the scripture to mean.**

And I emphasize that statement; "**what God meant it to mean**",

Because a lot of preachers and even more laymen as you well know, will read the scriptures and then tell you what **they** think it means. But that's not a correct interpretation of the Bible. Our personal view or thoughts have nothing to do with the correct interpretation of the word of God.

The truth is, every book of Scripture has a message, and that message can be understood. Some people read the Bible and they think, well, this is just a giant riddle? But God didn't intend it as a riddle, He intended it as a revelation.

Second Timothy 3:16 says, "**All Scripture is profitable**". That means, it has purpose, it has meaning. God is not playing a game of hide-and-seek with you. He doesn't invite you into His Word only to puzzle and confound you. He's far more interested that you understand it than you are.

Well, long story short, we were part of that fellowship for a few years. And it was like going to Bible College every time we met. In fact, Dr. Gillaspie had been a professor at SEBC for over fifty years before finally retiring. And through him I met other professors and past and present presidents of that college and then eventually attended there myself.

But none of that would have happened had I not drove up the hill that day to pray. And so again, the most important thing you can do, if you want to learn how to study, interpret and apply the scriptures is to pray. And then follow the steps you learn here as you put them into practice. Again you'll get out of Bible study what you're willing to put in.

So what exactly do we mean by "meaning"? Well, let me give you an illustration.

My grandson's color-blind, so he can't easily distinguish between greens and blues. And if you were to show him a sweater and say, "See this blue sweater."

You and him would both be looking at the same sweater, but the color you see, wouldn't be the same color he sees.

And things like that happen all the time when it comes to interpretation. Two people will look at the same verse and come up with two completely different interpretations. In fact, they may be opposing interpretations. Can they both be correct? Not if the laws of logic apply to Scripture.

But unfortunately, many people today have decided that the laws of logic don't apply to Scripture. To them, it doesn't really matter whether **you** see the text as blue and **I** see it as green. In fact, it doesn't really matter what color the text actually is. For them, the meaning of the text is not in the text, it's in their response to the text. And everyone is free to have his or her own response. And meaning becomes purely subjective.

Now there are some good reasons Christians may disagree on the interpretation of a passage. And we'll discuss that a bit later, but if we're to have any hope of interpreting God's Word accurately, we've got to start with a fundamental premise: **“Meaning” is not our subjective thoughts read into the text, but God's objective truth read out of the text.**

As someone has well said, the task of Bible study is to “think God's thoughts after Him.” He has a mind, and He has revealed it in His Word.

Now, the miracle is that He used human authors to do so. Working through their personalities, and their circumstances, and their concerns, the Holy Spirit superintended the crafting of a document. And each of the human authors—God's coauthors, we might call them—had a specific message in mind as he recorded his portion of the text.

That's why the author of our study refers to the step of Interpretation as the re-creation process. We're attempting to stand in the author's shoes and re-create his experience—to think as he thought, to feel as he felt, and to decide as he decided. We're asking, What did this mean to him? before we ever ask, What does it mean to us?

The Construction of Meaning

So how does Interpretation relate to Observation? Well, recall that in Observation we asked and answered the question, What do I see? That was the foundational phase of Bible study. Having done that, now we need to move on to Interpretation, where we develop the superstructure if you will.

You see, in Observation we excavate. In Interpretation we erect. And buildings are always determined by their foundations. The more substantial the foundation, the more substantial the superstructure. And in the same way, the quality of your interpretation will always depend on the quality of your observation. It is impossible to understand what a writer means; until

you notice what the writer says. Therefore, to observe well is to interpret well.

So why Interpretation? Why must we interpret Scripture? Why can't we just open the Word, read what we're supposed to do, and then do it? Why do we have to go to so much trouble to understand the text? The answer is that time and distance have thrown up barriers between us and the biblical writers; barriers which block our understanding. And so we need to understand and identify and appreciate what those roadblocks are. They are not insurmountable, but they are substantial.

The first one is language barriers.

Have you ever learned or tried to learn a foreign language? If so, then you know that learning the words is not enough. You have to learn the mind-set, the culture, the worldview of those who speak it if you really want to understand what they are saying.

Well, in the same way, when it comes to the Bible, we have some excellent translations from the Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic languages in which it was originally written. Even so, the English text leaves us a long way from a complete understanding. That's why the process of Interpretation involves the use of a Bible dictionary and other similar resources. We have to go back and recover the shades of meaning that translated words alone cannot convey.

And then we have cultural barriers and these are closely related to the problems of language, because language is always culture-bound. The Bible is the product and the presentation of cultures that are dramatically different from our own—and also different from each other. And so to appreciate what is going on in Scripture, we have to reconstruct the cultural

context in areas of communication, transportation, trade, agriculture, occupations, religion, perceptions of time, and so on.

This is where archaeology proves to be so helpful. And I'll give you some of those sources to consult later on.

Another problem we run into in interpreting Scripture is literally barriers or the variety of the terrain. If it were all mountains or desert or ocean, we could outfit ourselves appropriately and have at it. But the literary genres (janras) of the Bible are diverse and so they demand different approaches. We can't read the Song of Solomon with the same cold logic that we bring to Romans. We won't get the point of the parables through the same exhaustive word studies that might unlock truths in Galatians. And we'll go into more detail about that later as well.

And then we have Communication barriers. And one example of that I can think of is between parents and their children or even more of a barrier, between grandparents and their children. We don't speak the same language. And that's of course an age-old problem.

And even though God Himself is speaking through Scripture, we still must contend with breakdowns in the communication process. As finite creatures, we can never know exactly what is going on in someone else's mind. And so as a result, we have to settle for limited objectives in our interpretation of Scripture.

And the truth is, we'll never be able to answer every question we have when it comes to the word of God. Just like the old seasoned preacher who was approached by the local atheist while he was dining in a restaurant.. The skeptic came in and sat down, and pointed at the minister's Bible, and asked, "Reverend, you still believe that book?"

"Absolutely," the old gentleman replied.

“You mean you believe everything in it?”

“Every word.”

“Well,” he said, “is there anything you can’t explain?”

“Oh, there are lots of things I can’t explain,” the preacher responded. He opened his Bible and showed the fellow all the question marks in the margins.

Surprised, the man asked, “Well, what do you do with all of the things you can’t explain?”

He said, “Very simple. I do the same thing I’m doing with this fish I’m eating. I eat the meat and push all the bones to the side of the plate, and then let any fool that wants to choke over them.”

So we’ll never be able to explain everything in the Bible. And to stay there and argue about it or speculate about it, really is just a waste of time. So don’t get hung up where you can get hung out. Just move on. Don’t get all tied up in knots over the problems and unanswerable questions that come up in your study of the Bible.

The next barrier we’re going to save for next time.