

How Shall We Interpret Scripture?

Understanding Scripture

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As we come to our next session here for our little in-house conference on understanding Scripture, we come to a message today that I feel like I need to give you just a brief introduction on. This will be a little bit different than anything that I've ever done from the Truth Community pulpit because it's not specifically teaching a text of Scripture as much as doing something that's preliminary and giving us that which is necessary to understand any text of Scripture. It's kind of preliminary and, again, very foundational because we come to a crucial question this morning and that question is: how shall we interpret Scripture? What guidelines lead us to the truth? What should you be thinking? Looking for? Asking? Applying as you open up God's word and read it? This is another very fundamental question. In some ways, it's surprising to me as I stand here. Why haven't we done this sooner? But we need to understand something. We need to understand that we must have the meaning of Scripture if we are to have the truth. It is not enough simply to have the words on the page in front of you if you don't understand what they mean. We need to have the meaning of Scripture if we're going to have Scripture itself. So this message today, this message this morning, is a basic introduction to what is called hermeneutics which is the system of rules that we follow to interpret the Bible correctly.

Now, let me just kind of preface this and ask you for a favor, if I may. Some of this may be a little bit technical. This may sound a little bit more like a lecture than a sermon, but that's okay. It is foundational and so I just ask you to give me your mind and your heart for this next hour because these things are going to open up a lot of clarity for you and probably, again as it did for me looking back, on things that I did in the past that were misguided and hopefully give you that which can make your Scripture time and reading more productive. Let me introduce it by way of an analogy, an illustration. Suppose that you were going to go to Gettysburg, Pennsylvania to visit that great Civil War battlefield but you had never been there before and you don't know exactly how to get there. Gettysburg isn't like Boston or Miami on a map. You instantly know where those cities are but Gettysburg, okay, it's in Pennsylvania somewhere but I don't know just exactly where. Well, you have a fixed destination as your goal. "I want to go specifically to one place which is Gettysburg, Pennsylvania," and if you're going to drive, you have a car that is going to transport you there to that destination to get you from where you're at to where you intend to go. Then you have a GPS on your phone or an atlas or a AAA

roadmap to give you directions and say, "Oh, we turn here, not there. We go straight here, not there." So there are different elements that are in play to make a successful trip to that location, but there is one destination and you need something to get you there and you need directions along the way.

Well, that's kind of a rudimentary analogy to help you understand what we're going to be saying here today. To properly understand the Bible, you need to understand three things, I think. First of all, you need to know what your destination is and that destination is the author's intent. The Bible writers intended to communicate a meaning when they wrote and they intended to communicate a single meaning with any given sentence that they wrote. They had something in mind that they were trying to communicate and our goal is to understand what that author meant by what he wrote. That's the goal. That's the destination. It's a point that we are trying to get to. The vehicle, what is it that carries us to that destination? The vehicle is a literal interpretation of Scripture. I'm just giving you the outline in advance. Then the roadmap. The roadmap that we use are various principles of interpretation that we use in every passage that we look at. So we're going to look at the destination, the vehicle of interpretation and the roadmap that gets us there and that's just a little crude illustration to help you have a sense because some of these topics, some of these things that we are going to say are almost philosophical in nature and so I want to give you something that kind of gives you a word picture to point on and to hang your hat on so that you can understand what we're saying.

What's our goal in Bible interpretation? What's the destination? What are we trying to do? The first point this morning: the destination is the author's intent. The author's intent. Now, we've all been to Bible studies and you'll instantly understand why this is so crucial when I set it up for you this way. We have all been to Bible studies probably where at some time or another, someone says something like this, "Well, you know, what this verse means to me is...." and then they go and give their opinion about what those words from God mean and other people chime in, "Well, what it means to me..." and then you just start getting competing opinions and you're left in a fog and, frankly, you would have been better off not even having a study like that.

Well, when someone says, "What this verse means to me..." let me tell you, that is not the question. That is utterly irrelevant. We don't care, speaking to somebody who is not here, somebody that is an imaginary person even though I'm going to use the second person singular so don't take this personally. We don't care what that verse means to you. We don't care what that verse means to you. What we want to know is what that verse means. We want to know what that verse means if you had never been born. What did that verse mean before you existed? You see, that little illustration helps you see that there is a meaning in the text that is independent of the person who is reading the Scripture. It had meaning before any of us existed and it had a meaning that was fixed when the author wrote those words, either himself or through the secretary who recorded it for him.

So our question is: what did the biblical author mean by what he said? That's crucial. There comes a time and a place for us to apply the implications of the meaning, but when we're reading Scripture and trying to understand it, we are not interested in what I think it

means. We have to understand that our goal is to see what the author means and not put ourselves front and center in the process. This, beloved, is part of the humility that we were talking about at the end of the last session; part of the humility of deferring to the text; coming under the authority of the text instead of arrogantly putting ourselves at the center and saying, "This is what it means to me." That's really crucial.

Now, there is another crucial aspect to this: that God inspired the author to write the exact words that he wrote. So there is an authority in the biblical text that we need to respect. The text has a fixed meaning that preceded us and our goal in interpreting Scripture and our goal for understanding Scripture is to understand what that text means rather than simply imposing my opinion upon it and saying that my opinion is what matters and what is important. So the next time that someone says, "What this verse means to me is this..." well, you can handle that according to the wisdom that God gives you at the moment, but understand that for you and I, what our desire is, we want to know what this text means and that's a different question. We humble ourselves and let it speak for itself.

Now, tying it in with my illustration, we look for a fixed meaning just as Gettysburg is a fixed geographic location and it exists in one place in space and you have to go there to that point in Pennsylvania to get to Gettysburg. Can you imagine how ridiculous it would be for somebody to say, "I know what the map says. I know it says that Gettysburg is in Pennsylvania but, you know, in my heart of hearts, I believe that Gettysburg is in Idaho and I just feel that way. I feel that way about it and as I look about it, I just have this sense that God is telling me that regardless of what people have said in the past, Gettysburg is in Idaho." Well, you would look at a person like that and say, "You're nuts! You need to be admitted to a hospital where you can get help. Gettysburg is in Pennsylvania and it doesn't matter how you feel. You can't move Gettysburg from Pennsylvania to Idaho by your feelings and baptizing it with a sense that God told you that Gettysburg is really in Idaho." That's insane.

Do you know what? The meaning of God's word is a whole lot more important than where Gettysburg is and therefore it cannot possibly be that God would have us all have a subjective sense of our own opinion and what we feel that this text means. It is fixed and our goal is not to impose ourselves on that text with ridiculous ideas that have no bearing in reality. We need to get out the map and say, "Gettysburg is here." We need to get out the Bible and say, "Okay, this is what it means." That's really crucial. That's fundamental. Whenever you're reading the Bible, studying it, listening to a sermon, we're moving toward a destination, a direction. We're doing the best that we can to say, "What does this text mean?" That is essential.

Now, so, a fixed destination. Secondly, okay, that's fine but how do we get there? How do we get from here to there? To go to Gettysburg, you get in the car and you go and you drive on that miserable Pennsylvania turnpike. Yeah, amen. Anybody that's been on that is going to amen that statement. That's my new line. If I need an amen for encouragement, I'll just say, "I don't like the Pennsylvania turnpike." Amen! It will be there for me.

But how do we get from where we're at in our reading as we come to the text, how do we get from the point that we start with to the point of understanding the author's meaning? That brings us to our second point: the vehicle that we use is the literal interpretation of Scripture. We're answering the question: how do I determine what the author meant by the words that he used? Here's the simple answer and all of this – look, all of this ties together. We talked about the clarity of Scripture last night and we talked about the kind of person that you need to be to understand Scripture and now we're asking the question, "Well, how do we understand?" All of these things are taken together and the fact that Scripture is clear, leads us to this very simple observation. Simple, basic but, oh so fundamental: we take the author in the natural sense of the words that he used. We don't come to Scripture and read it as if it were full of indecipherable symbols communicating hidden mysteries that we have to look for as if it couldn't be understood on the face of the words that are used. No, we take the author in the natural sense of what he said.

Now, we call that method by different names. Some call this the literal principle of interpretation and what they mean by that and that's a good term, we read his words in the literary form that he employed. Remember, that God intended his Scripture to be clear and so as he inspired the biblical author to use particular words, he was intending for them to communicate clearly as he directed them in what they said. Well, the only way that it can be clear is if there is a plainness, an openness to the words that is obvious to those who would read them, rather than some kind of mystery.

You know, years ago, 10-15 years ago, there was a big splash about something called the Bible code and what people said was that if you used mathematical equations and if, for example, you'd take every fifth letter of the text you would get prophetic messages about what was going to happen in the world and supposedly this was used to show that the Bible text indicated world events 2,000 years before they happened and you'd look at the cover of the book and there would be, it was kind of like a word search and they'd draw circles around the letters that were involved and you'd read the letters that way and it would communicate these hidden meanings. That was all bogus from the very beginning. That's all impossible and I want you to understand why it's impossible even though that's something from years ago that isn't dominating anyone's attention right now. You should know, just based on what we've done already so far, that it is impossible that that was ever true. That that was ever what God intended to do with his word. First of all, it's not clear. You have to generate programs and you have to use the biblical text, instead of just being able to read it and that there is clarity on the surface of it, but you have to dive into some kind of mystery mathematical formula in order to understand God's word. Not true. Absolutely false. Sold some guy a bunch of books and I'm sure he's got a nice house as a result and Christians are notoriously vulnerable to that kind of nonsense because they're looking for shortcuts because they don't want to do the work that's involved to understand God's word. They want something that is special and flamboyant and, "Oh, isn't that cool! Look, it showed that Lincoln was going to wear his black suit to the Ford Theater that night! The Bible predicted that." As if that's something that was going to give people a sense that God's word was inspired. Not true. Not true and the reason that it's not true is because that's not clear. That wouldn't be evident on the surface to somebody like you and me.

So the Bible isn't written in these mysteries that we have to figure out, we can read the text in the natural sense in the way that the author wrote them and understand it that way. So that's really important. Just understanding the literal interpretive principle would negate a whole genre of books that existed some years ago and to the credit of good scholars, there were people that debunked that pretty quickly so the guy made his money off the book and ran. Disgusting.

Now, a more technical term for what we do is called the grammatical historical method and we're using that term synonymously with the literal method and to use the term grammatical historical method is simply to say this: that's a fancy term – stay with me, if you would – it's a fancy way to say that we understand the biblical author by the words and grammar he wrote to his audience in their historical context. Let me say it again. It's very simple. It's intuitive, really. It's basic to human communication. How do you understand what I'm saying now? You take my words at the literal sense in which I use them in this historical context. You understand intuitively the nouns and the verbs that I use and the grammatical constructions and you say, "Okay, I'm following him." Well, it's the same way with the Bible. Human language, the dynamics of human language transcend time and culture. People communicate with the words that they use and they intend to be understood when they are being written in Scripture. So that's the idea.

Now, within that broad statement, we understand something important. We know that the biblical authors used different kinds of literature to express their literal meaning. Follow me here and this will help set the stage for so much. There are different kinds of literature in the Bible. There is legal literature in Exodus and Leviticus saying, "You shall. You shall not." Those things are kind of hard to read sometimes. There is historical narrative where there is a story being told that's different from the shall nots. In Revelation, you have prophetic imagery and visions being given, however you understand that. In the Psalms, you have poetry being written. In the New Testament epistles, you have a different kind of instruction going on. So when we say that we use the literal meaning, that we're after that, we understand that there are different ways, different kinds of literature that were being used, but we understand also that in whatever form it was being taken, information that was intended to be understood was being communicated. That's very basic. That's probably as technical as I'm going to get today. If you're still with me, you're through the hard part. The wave has already hit us and now we can stand up and swim. I know that doesn't make any sense but I'm not a swimmer. Why would you stand up and swim? You dive in and swim, is what I should say. You stand up and walk. Get your metaphors right, pastor. Anyway, here we go.

We're talking about the literal interpretation and here's what I want you to walk with me through this. In the four Gospels and in the book of Acts, for example, the writers were giving an historical account to describe what happened. In the New Testament epistles, they wrote in an orderly fashion to teach about Christ and doctrine to the audience that the apostle was writing to. In other places like the Psalms, they wrote poetically and they used figures of speech to express their meaning. But there is not a deep mystery, an indecipherable subjectivity in that, we use figures of speech all the time in our language

and we understand that it's a figure to express a real meaning. So, for example, if I came to you and I said, "You know, my kid said this to me last night and I exploded with laughter." Well, you're not thinking that my body literally flew into pieces. You realize that I just burst out with a laugh in response and that "explosion" was simply a metaphor, a figure of speech to say, "I burst out with a response." You understand that and you don't try to over-interpret that. "Well, your stomach lining seems to be in order now. Was it repaired surgically?" No one does that. We shouldn't do that to Scripture either. In the Psalms, David said, Psalm 23, he said, "The Lord is my shepherd." Well, you know that he's not trying to say that God is a literal shepherd in a literal field in the land of Palestine overlooking actual sheep. You know that's not true. What David is saying with that figure of speech is, "God watches his own and he protects them like a shepherd does his sheep. God is like a shepherd in the way that he protects and cares for me."

So you can understand that meaning and so when we say that we interpret the Bible literally, we mean that we're trying to take the author in the natural sense in which he wrote and that includes poetry and figures of speech and we can get to his meaning by saying, "Okay, I'm going to listen to this author like I would listen to one of you. I'm going to read the Bible expecting a natural sense that is similar to what I have when I read a magazine or a newspaper, that there is an intended clarity on the surface of the meanings." Now, that's our general principle. That's our general principle. That's our vehicle. Remember, what we want to get to is the author's intent and our question is: how do I get there? We say, "Okay, I'm going to take him by what he said rather than imposing my thoughts upon it or twisting it to make it say something that is unnatural to the words and the grammar that he used."

Now, this brings us to our roadmap. Point 3. We're already to point 3, how about that? Point 3 is the roadmap and what I just said about the literal meaning is the general idea and within the general idea, there are specific principles that you can follow and understand to help you understand what the author meant to say. Now, a disclaimer here: I understand that I'm not going to say everything that should be said about this topic. What I want to do is to give you that which is basic. I want to give you that that is most predominantly helpful, realizing that lots of thick books have been written about how to interpret Scripture and so we're not trying to replicate what long books say, we're trying to give something that is practical to somebody who is fairly new to reading the Bible and understanding and believing that these principles stand the test of much closer scrutiny.

So what can we say? What principles can help us arrive at the author's meaning. I'm going to give you three, I believe it is, three principles for you to use and if you use these principles, you will go far down the road toward properly understanding Scripture even on your own. What's the first principle? First of all, beloved, you must pay attention to context. You must pay attention to the context of the verse that you're reading and trying to understand.

Now, at this point, let me step off of my notes for a moment which is always dangerous, to say something about the nature of our Bibles that work against you using this principle. My Bible and probably yours is like this as well, there is a tendency in Christian

publishing to publish each verse as a separate paragraph and so that you have one verse and then there is a break and there is the next verse. It's not like a book that you read where there are paragraphs and there are two or three sentences in each paragraph and then you move on to another paragraph. The Bible is written often in a way, published in a way where one verse is separated off from another as we have them now in our modern printing habits. Understand that the Bible was not originally written that way, that the verse divisions and chapter divisions were something that came many centuries later. When the biblical authors wrote, they intended for you to read the flow of thought. Our tendency today, I'm sure that some of your tendencies even as we sit here today, is because a verse is set off in its own little separate paragraph, you tend to think about that verse as being independent from everything else and why wouldn't you? It's set apart and so it invites you, the very way that the printed page is done, invites you to take that verse and look at it alone. Look at it standing alone, but that's the wrong way to do it. You see, there were things that were written, unless you're looking at the first verse of the book, there were things that were written beforehand and things that were written afterwards and the biblical author had a unit; had a flow of thought that he was expressing.

So it's a bad practice to pull out one verse and try to build everything that you believe out of one verse. That's not the right way to handle Scripture. If we're going to understand Scripture and interpret it properly, we have to pay attention to the context and there are three little principles inside this point that I want to give to you to give you some ideas of what to look for. The author's context – watch this – gives you an objective measure to see what was on his mind and so context may be found, first of all, you can find the context in the author's purpose statement in what he said. Look as you're reading a book of the Bible, look for a place where he says, "This is why I'm writing." And I'm going to take you to some scriptural examples now and we'll kind of illustrate this and some of these things may become more clear rather than abstract.

Look at the Gospel of Luke, for example, and this kind of stuff just really gets my juices going because in a big long book like 24 chapters of the Gospel of Luke and the hundreds of verses that are in there, how do you even begin? Here's a question and picture yourself as someone who is just for the first time coming to the Bible as a Christian and wanting to read and understand it. How do you get oriented? Where do you find your bearings? Where do you find the reference points to know what this means? Well, the biblical writers knew that we were going to need that help. They had something that they wanted to communicate and often they said it very plainly what their goal was and when you see and identify that goal, then you interpret the rest of the whole book in light of that. It's very exciting to see these things.

Look at what Luke says, Luke 1:1. He says, "Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us." What is he saying there? He said, "A lot of people are talking about this." Verse 2, "just as they were handed down to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word." Luke says, "We have received a lot of information from those who were with Christ and a lot of people are taking to write about this." Verse 3, he says, "it seemed fitting for me as well." So he is laying out the biblical author, Dr. Luke, is laying out what motivated him

to write from the very start and he said, "it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write it out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus." That's the one to whom he addressed this Gospel. "So that you may know the exact truth about the things you have been taught." Wow. Simple, plain and evident. Luke says, "A lot of people are talking about this. Well, what I wanted to do, what I did here was I investigated everything carefully about the Lord Jesus and about his life and ministry on the earth and I want to give you something that is accurate and that you can rely upon as you read about the life of Christ so that you could know the exact truth about the things that you've been taught."

Right there you have the purpose statement and everything else in Luke is designed to serve that one purpose, that overarching main purpose. So as you go through and as you read the account of Jesus' birth and you go through his teaching and to the crucifixion and the resurrection and the ascension, the whole goal of all of that is the biblical author here is giving you exactly what happened so that it inspires in your heart as sense of confidence and accuracy in what you're reading. "Okay, this is what really happened. I know that because that's the author's intent." So for us to go and to question and say, "Maybe it didn't really happen that way," is a violation of the author's intent. That could not possibly be a correct interpretation because it would violate the author's purpose in what he said.

Let me give you another example, turn to the end of the Gospel of John, John 20. Sometimes these purpose statements are put in the front, sometimes they are at the end, sometimes they're woven in the middle of the letter. You want to be looking for these fundamental clues that say, "Here is why I wrote this book," and let that define in general that by which you would interpret the details. John, chapter 20, verse 30 and 31 says, "Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book." He says, "There are a lot of things I could have written about but I just chose a few." Why did you do it that way, John? Why didn't you give us everything about Jesus? Why didn't you write everything about Jesus? He said, "That wasn't my purpose to give you an exhaustive recitation of everything that the Lord ever did and said. My purpose was more narrow; it was more precise; it was more targeted." Verse 31, "but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name." Okay, so there's a narrow focus here. He said, "I wrote this so that you would believe in Christ, my reader, and that believing you would have eternal life; you would have life in his name." He was writing to provoke a spiritual result; to bring a spiritual influence to bear upon the reader of his Gospel, that purpose being that they would recognize Christ as the only Savior. "Believe in him and have eternal life." That's his purpose.

So as he gives seven different signs in the early chapters of the Gospel of John, reciting miraculous things that Jesus did, the point of those miracles is for you to believe that Jesus is unique, distinct, someone to be believed in and the miracles lead you to believe his teaching and when you believe his teaching, you believe in him for eternal life, and so that guides the way that you understand the individual passages in the Gospel of John. It's all laid out there.

Let me take you to one or two more. Turn to 1 John. I love these too. You know, if I ever say, I know I say that all the time, "I love this passage. I love this text." Whatever. If I ever say, "You know, I really don't love this text so much. I don't like this text," if I ever say that, know that I've lost my mind and that it's time for me to stop preaching because all of God's word is precious and all of God's word can be understood when a godly Christian like you applies effort to learn it in dependence on the Holy Spirit. It can all be understood. It's so precious.

John gives us three different verses that indicate why he wrote. 1 John 1:4, he said, "These things we write, so that our joy may be made complete." He's writing to promote mutual joy amongst his readers and a personal joy that he got out of it himself as he wrote. So there's a goal of joy. 1 John should promote joy in the heart of the one who understands it rather than morbid introspection. I know I'm using that word a lot lately, that term a lot, that's okay. 1 John 2:1 says, "My little children, I am writing these things to you so that," there's the purpose. Do you see it? "So that you may not sin." He says, "I want you to know joy," 1 John 1:4 and he says, "I want to promote holiness in your life. The things that I'm saying will help you turn from sin and live in obedience to Christ. That's why I'm writing. I'm writing to promote your joy. I'm writing to promote your holiness." 1 John 5:13, he says, "These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that," purpose, "you may know that you have eternal life."

So as you read through the five chapters of 1 John, you see, "Okay, I know what he's trying to do here. He's writing to Christians and he's trying to cultivate deeper joy, deeper obedience and deeper assurance into their lives and the other things that he says, I interpret in light of those principles. I say how does this particular verse connect to the greater purpose of which he is writing."

One more that stands out. Turn to the book of Jude, just a little bit to the right there, just before the book of Revelation. I love these things, this kind of stuff. What I like about it is that it's so evident. I know that you can see this for yourself. Jude 3 says, "Beloved, while I was making every effort to write you about our common salvation, I felt the necessity to write to you appealing," what? "That, appealing that you contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints. For certain persons have crept in unnoticed, those who were long beforehand marked out for this condemnation, ungodly persons who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ." Jude says right at the start why he's writing. It's a different purpose than what Luke wrote his Gospel for or John's Gospel or the letter of 1 John. He says, "I'm writing to you to encourage you, to uphold you to contend for the faith because there are ungodly people operating in the church that are denying the reality of the grace of God and turning it and twisting it into something that it's not." He said, "And I'm writing to protect you and I'm writing to urge you to protect the faith that has been given to us by a gracious and a holy God."

So everything else that you read in the surrounding 25 verses there, you understand that he's writing to accomplish that particular purpose. The context helps you understand what

is being said. One way that you find the context is in the author's purpose statement. Now, it won't always be that clear. Sometimes there are other clues to his context, to his meaning. Context may be found in key words that he repeats over and over again that show the main theme. You can tell what's on somebody's mind when they keep repeating something else. They keep repeating themes and going back to that which they are talking about. You say, "Okay, I see. This is heavy on his mind." You know, somebody is dealing with a problem in his family maybe and it seems to come up each time and you say, "Okay, I understand that that family problem is deep on his heart and that helps me understand other things that he says and other that he does because when I talk to him, I see that this comes out." Well, that gives you a clue into the inside of a man's character, right? Well, in the same way, when a biblical author starts to repeat words or to repeat themes, you have a sense of what the purpose is that he's writing about.

So, for example, we won't look at all of these. We won't look at any of them, actually. In the book of Romans, the word "righteousness," the English word "righteousness" occurs 35 times in those 16 chapters. Well, that influences your interpretation of each passage and you look at the words and you compare how they are used in different ways and it rounds out your understanding of this theme of righteousness that he's trying to communicate.

Context might be found in key transitions. Look at Ephesians 4. We use this one just because it's one we did recently from the pulpit. Ephesians 4. And all we can do in a message like this is just mark out certain things for you to then take and apply and look for in your own reading. To apply them to every passage of Scripture would involve teaching Genesis through Revelation in detail. This undergirds everything else.

Look at Ephesians 4:1. Context may be found in key transitions is what we're saying here and Paul says, "Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called." He starts it out, in English it's the first word, in Greek it would be the second word, he starts out with that word "therefore." Well, that "therefore," you see, he didn't start out...here's the thing that you see: when you're reading Scripture for yourself, you're reading it in context, you don't look at verse 4 and say, "Oh, he is imploring us to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord." That's the wrong way to look at the text. That is inadequate. It is insufficient because he uses this word "therefore." His command to walk in a manner worthy of Christ is based upon what came earlier. One way to illustrate it: at the end of this day at 3 o'clock we're going to be done after four sessions and I'll say, "Therefore go out and read the Bible and be encouraged." Well, that's going to be based on my call for you to read the Bible and be encouraged is going to be informed by everything that I said in the prior four sessions. Well, in the same way the biblical author says, "Therefore." He is connecting it with what went before.

So when Paul here says, "Therefore," what is he saying? In that one little word, he is saying this, he's saying, "In light of all that I have said in the first three chapters about God's gracious gift of salvation, how he chose us, adopted us, redeemed us and sealed us with the Spirit, in the light of the way that I've prayed and God has brought Jews and

Gentiles together in the church and it's been this magnificent work of God and Christ, therefore, I implore you to walk in a manner that is worthy of Christ." He's connecting it with everything that is said before so that you would remember the fullness of the greatness of salvation and that that would affect your motivation in order to obey the command to walk in a worthy manner. You see the context and rather than picking one verse out and turning it into a moralistic legalistic thing, you need to obey Christ, well you do need to obey Christ but what informs that? What informs that is the unfolding of great biblical truth about who Christ is and what he has done that makes you want to obey. If you separate it from that context, you cut the nerve, you cut the umbilical cord. You separate it from the nerve that makes that muscle work.

So we said, what's the roadmap to the author's meaning? Pay attention to context. What's his purpose statement, for example? What themes is he talking about? What transitions does he use? Sometimes it might be a contrast, "but," you know, "The Gentiles live like this but you do something different." You look for things like that but all of it, beloved, here's the thing, is understanding that these things are right there in what he already said. You don't have to look for something mystical that's not found in the words that he used. Okay? So you pay attention to context.

Secondly, what else would you do if you want to arrive at the author's meaning? You do this: you pay attention to other Scripture. You pay attention to other Scripture. The Bible is the word of God and behind the human authors was the divine mind of God operating and directing them to what they would write. They were human instruments that God used to express what he wanted to say ultimately. Simple point. Very profound. Very helpful in helping you understand Scripture properly. Understand that the divine mind of God brings a unity to what Scripture says. He is a God of truth. He will not contradict himself. So we interpret individual passages of Scripture in harmony with other Scripture that teaches on the same subject.

So, for an example, just generally basically speaking, simple and so easy to understand these things. Suppose, let's put it this way: you know that Scripture teaches that salvation is by grace through faith. Scripture teaches that. That's woven throughout Scripture from beginning to end. Now, if you come to an individual passage that seems to suggest that maybe our works play a role in our salvation, well, you shouldn't run with that interpretation and say, "Oh, you know, I found a verse that overturns the Reformation. Actually salvation is by works and here's the one verse that shows that." No, that would be wrong. That would make God's word contradictory, inconsistent with itself. So as you're interpreting a passage, especially a difficult passage of Scripture, you say, "Okay, what does the Scripture say about this elsewhere," and let Scripture interpret Scripture and give you guidance so that you get to the right meaning. So when you think that you have understood what a passage means, be mindful to compare it with other passages on the same subject to see if you have consistency across God's word.

So you interpret it according to context. You interpret it according to other Scripture. Understand that as we say these things, behind that are some important things. There are important principles. The human author, his imprint his real. He used real human words

and had his own flow of thought. There is a dual authorship, though, in the sense that God was inspiring not only that one author but the same one God with the same omniscient mind was inspiring the other 39 authors as well, 40 authors of the 66 books roughly. So there is this one great divine mind operating over a course of a millennium and a half, 1,500 years, guiding these writers to say consistent truth in his revelation. So we don't pit Scripture against Scripture.

I'll give you an illustration. One of the things that people use to deny that repentance from sin is an integral part of the Gospel message and of a saving response to Christ is this: they say, "Do you know what? The Gospel of John does not use the word 'repentance' and therefore," watch their logic on this. I'm not misrepresenting them. They say, "Therefore since John was written to teach people how to come to Christ and he doesn't use the word 'repentance' therefore repentance is not part of the Gospel." That is foolish because the other Gospels have a lot to say. They are introduced on the premise, "Repent and believe in the Gospel," Mark 1:15, Matthew 4. And what do they do? They try to cut out, they try to ignore what the other Gospels say about repentance by narrowing it down to the one Gospel of John and saying, "This is the only thing that matters," and they pit one Gospel against the other. That's deplorable. You don't pit Scripture against Scripture, you take it as a totality and you say, "How can we read these things in harmony? How can we read that particular thing in harmony?" John wrote 30 or 40 years after the three other Gospels were completed. What they had said was established and so he's bringing out another dimension, another aspect of salvation that he wanted to emphasize, not contradicting, not denying the totality of biblical teaching on repentance. Well, if you would just interpret Scripture in harmony with other Scripture, you wouldn't make those kinds of errors.

So you see, beloved, and here's the thing: as much as anything, I want to deepen your reverence and commitment to God's word. I know that you come in here with that already in place and what we're doing now is just digging a little bit deeper and making that go even further in your mind. We revere God's word. We fear God. We honor him. We respect him. We defer to the Scriptures to such an extent that we say, "I respect Scripture enough that I'm not going to manipulate one passage against another in order to achieve my theological objective. I'm going to defer to Scripture and let it all speak equally because it all comes from God and therefore it all ought to be weighed before I make basic pronouncements about what the nature of salvation is." You see, your view of Scripture starts to inform how you do these things.

Now thirdly, this is the final principle for interpretation here today. There are a lot more but these are just basic things to help you as you read the Bible for yourself and understanding that for someone, if someone was going to get up and teach in our church, there would be a lot more that we would need to say. The goal here is for everyone to have some basics in place where you can read the Bible profitably for yourself. That's my goal. That's why we're doing it this way today.

Now, I need to give you just a couple of more technical terms, maybe. We said you pay attention to context. You pay attention to other Scripture. Thirdly, this principle will do

wonders for you: distinguish between historical and didactic material. That's a mouthful. I'll say it again. Distinguish between historical and didactic material. This is a very important point that is easy to miss. When we say historical, we're simply saying that there are parts of Scripture that are designed to recount history and to give an accurate account of what actually happened. Didactic material is that material is designed specifically to prescribe for us how we are to believe and to behave.

Now, the message of Scripture between historic and didactic properly interpreted is consistent with each other, but as you are reading Scripture, you need to be mindful of the distinctions lest you make a very serious mistake. Some Bible books are primarily historical in nature. Follow me, this is very important but it's not all that technically really. The terms are technical but what they're saying is obvious and easy to understand. The historical books are describing past actions of men and women in history and so we have the 12 Old Testament books between Joshua and Esther in our English Bibles that we call the historical books. They are describing the history of what happened in the people of Israel from the time they crossed over into the Promised Land until Esther's queenship some 1,000 years later. Historical narrative – watch this – I'm going to illustrate this and it's going to be so easy and so obvious that it's all going to go on like a light bulb in your mind. Historical narrative may or may not be telling you what to believe or do. Its primary purpose is to record what happened. You need to be careful about whether it's prescribing things for you to do or not.

I'll give you an easy undeniable example and when you see how simple this is, a smile will light up your face. Genesis 4:8, Cain killed his brother Abel. That is an historic description and account of what happened. Do you know what? It is not a commandment for you to go and do likewise to your siblings, right? It's describing an action that was wrong and sinful, but it described it accurately but you understand that you shouldn't go out and kill your brother because Cain killed his. Sometimes you just need the most basic thing to establish the principle to understand that.

So as we read the Old Testament, now today as New Testament believers, we understand that there are a lot of things that are recorded there that are in God's word but that are not meant for us to go out and do ourselves so we don't slay bulls as a sin offering. We don't shout hosannas to human kings of Israel. Why do we not kill a bull? Because Christ was the sacrifice slain for our sins and so the didactic portions of Scripture help us understand why we wouldn't repeat something that was done in the Old Testament. In like manner, not everything that Jesus did in the Gospels was something that we're supposed to do likewise. Jesus went to the cross and offered himself as a sacrifice for the sins of humanity. That's not a prescription for us to go and do likewise. That's for us to believe and to receive. We're not supposed to go out and imitate everything that Jesus did. We're not supposed to go out and do miracles like Jesus did. We don't go and die on a cross like he did. Some of the things that Jesus did as Jew, he did in a way to fulfill them so that we wouldn't have to. He fulfilled those ceremonies so that we wouldn't have to continue those and carry them over into our Christian life. Not everything he did is something that we are supposed to do ourselves. Some things he did to fulfill Scripture and to do it on our behalf so that we wouldn't have to.

Historic, you have to understand the nature of historic literature and be careful with the way that you handle it. Even if something seems righteous by what a biblical character did, don't automatically say, "Therefore I must go and do this myself." Watch that. Be careful. So many people go astray on that very point.

Now, by contrast, other portions of Scripture are didactic. They are designed to prescribe what you are to believe and to do. The epistles are especially this way. Look at 1 Corinthians 14:37, Paul says, "If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritual, let him recognize that the things which I write to you are the Lord's commandment." Paul says, "What I am writing is authoritative. This is what you must believe and do." He could say those things because he was an apostle of Christ. He was doing what Christ appointed him to do. He spoke with the authority of Christ as an apostle of Christ.

So in these didactic portions, Paul is laying out, "Here is what you must believe. Here is what you must do." And thinking just to illustrate that, in 1 Corinthians 5, there was an immoral man in the assembly who had his father's wife and Paul says, "You've got to rid of him! Cast him out! Protect the purity of the church." 1 Timothy 3. I'm going to end this with an illustration that I think will be really helpful to you and encouraging to you. 1 Timothy 3:14. Somewhere down the road, a couple 3-4 years down the road in our church, Lord willing we'll have a whole class on hermeneutics and we'll do 10 or 12 weeks of this to really flesh all of this out but this is enough to guide you to read Scripture profitably for yourself.

1 Timothy 3:14-15, Paul says, "I am writing these things to you." Uh-oh, remember principle of context? Purpose statements? Your ears perk up when a writer says that. Why did you write these things, Paul? "In case I'm delayed. I write so that." "So that" could become some of the most precious words in all of Scripture for you. "I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth." Paul says, "I am writing to tell you as a Christian how the church is to function." This is not material that maybe we do or don't, Paul is saying, "This is authoritative. What I'm writing is binding on the church." That's because he's writing didactic material.

So, beloved, with those simple thoughts, pay attention to context; pay attention to other Scripture, distinguish historic from didactic material, you're well down the road to be able to read the Bible profitably for yourself with a sense of confidence that, "Do you know what? I think I'm getting it right here."

Now, I want to give you, as we close family time here, a true personal story that will illustrate all of these principles for you. We just finished the third session. It's hard for me to believe that. I'd like to go for six more, but I won't. The amens were a lot softer on that one for those of you listening at home. A true personal story to illustrate this and to let you see how sweet, precious and determinative these things are. The story that I am about to tell you is why I went into ministry. It was that important and significant in my life and this is emotional to me because it shows the preciousness of God's word.

I had been a Christian for less than 30 days. I had no church. I had no Christian friends. I had no Christian books. None. I had one Bible. And in the process of reading and all of that and my antenna started to come up for other Christians, I was attracted to, God brought providentially into my life, there was a Christian radio program on a secular rock network out of Indianapolis that I got connected to. I think they broadcast at like midnight on Sunday. You know, it was some very late hour and they played Christian rock music which I don't recommend to you now but, you know, I'm a newborn infant. In the words of Ezekiel, I'm still in all of the juices of new birth. No one had come to wash me up and to wrap me in clothes to get me started as even a baby Christian. I was brand new. I knew nothing except that God's word was true and these people claimed to be Christians and so they had my ear.

So I called them. I didn't know these guys and they said, "Come up. Come up to the studio and be with us at our next studio show." So I did that. They are broadcasting live and I'm there and listening to them as they're doing the program that I had listened to. One of those guys there, I'm not going to be critical of him, I'm just going to tell you. This is historical, not didactic, okay? One of the two guys that was there asked me, he said, "So Don, do you have the gift of the Holy Spirit?" by which he meant, "Do you speak in tongues?" I said and I didn't know anything about tongues at that point. The only thing that I knew was that my unsaved father hated that manifestation of spirituality and that was the only thing that I had to go on and I said, "You know, my dad who is not a believer said that tongues were a bad thing. That's all that I know." He said, "Let me help you." He opened up his Bible. That's impressive. And he turned to Acts 2:4 and he said, "Listen to what Scripture says." He said, "And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues as the Spirit was giving them utterance." He read Scripture and he closed it and he said, "Do you see, Don? You need to speak in tongues like we do."

Wow. I'm a brand new Christian. I'm in the juices of new birth. I'm covered with blood, so to speak, because I'm such a new Christian. Something seemed wrong but I didn't know what but I knew that in my heart what I wanted was I wanted the truth. I didn't care what the implications of it were, I just wanted the truth, but I had a hard time believing that what he had told me was true but I had no ability to refute it as I stood there with him so I drove home. It was a 50 mile drive home which means it was a 50 mile drive to get there and I was driving home in a blinding blizzard from Indianapolis to Bloomington on highway 37. I'm thinking through these things and I think, at one point I went, "Ahhhh," to see if anything came out. Nothing came out and so I'm really confused and I'm really concerned and there is a lot at stake because the future of my Christian life is at stake here. Something seemed wrong and I didn't know what and what did I do when I got home? I opened my Bible and in the back of that Bible which I no longer have. It is somewhere in the land of Russia right now. There was a concordance and I went to the concordance and I just looked up tongues and it pointed me to 1 Corinthians 12:30 where it says, "All do not speak with tongues, do they?" I immediately knew that that guy was mistaken. He was wrong even though he had the radio show. He had the audience, but he

was wrong. You can't say that every Christian should speak in tongues when the Bible says, "Not all speak with tongues, do they?" Expecting the answer, "No, they don't."

Now, that incident illustrates many things. First of all, that incident illustrates why that man was in error. He was in error because of what we just discussed right here. He was using historical biblical material to make a didactic point. Acts 2:4 is not designed to teach that every person should speak in tongues. We know that because elsewhere when we compare Scripture with Scripture, we go to the didactic portions and it says, "Not everyone does." So whatever else we say about tongues in the future, we know that it's not a command for everyone to do that.

Watch this. Watch this bigger point and you'll see why this is so precious to me. Embedded in that true story is the clarity of Scripture and the illumination of the Holy Spirit. I was a nobody, still am, but I was a nobody 3 o'clock, alone in my single bedroom apartment in Bloomington, Indiana and all I had was a Bible and my heart was really disturbed about what I had just heard and I opened up a Bible that is clear. That is known for, which is made by its perspicuity. It can be understood by the simplest of believers who are sincere in seeking the truth and the Spirit of God enabled me to understand and to discern the truth on a major doctrinal point just through the Bible.

As a nobody believer in a nobody apartment in a nobody town, God's word led me in the truth as the Spirit opened my understanding when I read it. I couldn't have explained anything about interpretation to you. I didn't have to know the things that we've discussed here this morning in order for the Scriptures to guide me rightly in my Christian life. Do you know what? That same reliable guidance is available to you as a believer as well and maybe it will be different issues for you than it was for me, but that, beloved, that's how trustworthy Scripture is. That's how clear it is. That's how precious it is, that someone of no account could open it and find the truth of God contained within it.

My story is not unique. Precious to me, but it's not the point, it's just an illustration. God uses his clear word to help his sincere people. People just like you can read his word. You can honor his word. You can read it naturally with the confidence that God will give you understanding that will lead you in a true knowledge of Christ. That's precious. Will you be that Christian man, that Christian woman, that Christian young person just on the start of your life, will you be that man that says, "I'm going to trust this word. I'm going to believe this word. I'm going to believe this word. I'm going to protect this word. I'm going to defend it. I'm going to teach it. I'm going to proclaim it. I'm going to treasure it. It's the most precious thing that I have. Your words were found and I ate them and your words became for me the delight and the joy of my heart because I have been called by thy name, O Lord God of hosts." Will you be that person? Blessing awaits you.

Let's pray.

Thank you, Father, for your precious word. Thank you that it's clear. Thank you that you didn't write to scholars and experts and make it only known to them. You made it know to simple nobodys like us. How gracious are you, Father. How sweet are your affections

toward your people. How powerful is your mind to write a book through human authors that can infallibly guide people to Christ and salvation and then lead them in the truth and protect them from wolves and dogs. How great are you. How great is your word. We can't answer that question, Father, because to answer the question of your greatness would take us into the realm of infinity and we can't articulate that. There is a limit to our language, Father, but we can see it truly if not exhaustively. Your greatness is great. Your greatness is high and lofty and in one particular way, your greatness is shown in that your word can be understood when we handle it rightly, sincerely, earnestly and, our God, we thank you for that. O God, guide us. Make us a people, make this a church of people who read your word for themselves, who understand it and cherish it. In the name of Christ Jesus our Lord we pray. Amen.