

The Interpretive Process

Four major steps are involved in the interpretive process.

1. Careful Observation
2. Asking Interpretive Questions
3. Thinking through to an Interpretive Conclusion
4. Anchoring Our Interpretation in the Application of Interpretive Principles

Let's look at each of these in more detail.

1. Careful Observation

Here's where most of us either win or lose. Weak and inaccurate interpretation inevitably results from superficial or careless observation. Ours is the "instant" age, especially in America. We want "instant" everything it seems. But there is no such thing as instant understanding when we seek to interpret the Scriptures. We need to emulate some of the meticulous scholarship of the previous century. One wonders how a single lifetime would be long enough to produce some of the mammoth biblical scholarship of the past. I believe that if we applied ourselves as the earlier scholars did, we would discover depths of truth even they did not see, for we have the benefit of all the previous generations of scholarship. So, let's be good observers. First, we must immerse ourselves in the book we are studying by repeated readings of the whole book. There is no substitute for this. We need to treat it as if it were a love letter from the one who loves us the most.

Then we should change our approach to that of a news reporter, who must constantly ask and answer the *who, what, when, where, why, and how* of his subject.

Who is writing? About *whom*? And to *whom*?

About *what* is he writing? That is, we must try to discover the major subject he seeks to cover. *What* is the situation of writer and reader? *What* circumstances surround them? *What* is their nationality and cultural setting? *What* is their recent history? *What* is the exact meaning of the words used?

What literary form has the writer used: poetry, parable, narrative, history, logical argumentative discourse, prophecy?

When is the action taking place, especially in relation to the rest of biblical history?

Where is the action taking place? *Where* is the writer going with his argument? *Where* does he expect to carry his hearers?

Why is the book or passage being written? *Why* does the writer move from one topic to another in his discourse? *Why* is he angry, or excited, or pleading, or commanding, or exhorting?

How does he proceed to present his subject, through what logical steps or progress of thought? *How* does he

seek to persuade his hearers? *How* does he relate personally to the message he is declaring? *How* does he introduce his subject? *How* does he conclude his communication? *How* is he motivated to write? *How* is he related to the ultimate Author of his book? *How* has he responded to the truth he is declaring? *How* have the intervening centuries clouded his content through changes in word meanings, cultural differences, and the changed viewpoints of modern man? *How* has he managed to communicate unchanging truth, in spite of all? *How* does his writing affect my approach to the facts of life and alter my life style?

You can see, we must really do our homework. Let me testify, however, that the result is worth it--for ourselves, and for those with whom we share God's truth.

Observing Word Meanings

Part of our observation is arriving at the clear meaning of words. To me, one of the most fascinating areas of study is investigating the exact, definitive content of individual words. After all, if we really don't understand the words in a sentence or paragraph, we can hardly expect to understand the thought or idea being communicated. And remember, our aim, as good Bible interpreters, is to get at the intended meaning of the writer. Apart from that, we are just playing games, probably to justify our preconceptions.

There are several veins we can mine in our digging for the hidden treasures of the word. Here are two of them.

- Using the English dictionary
- Exploring the meanings of Greek and Hebrew words used in the original language text.

For now, we'll stick with the English dictionary, leaving Hebrew and Greek for later chapters. The dictionary is perhaps one of the most valuable, and the most neglected, of the tools we can use to understand the English Bible. Think a minute; when was the last time you reached for the dictionary? I believe that most Christians would flunk a vocabulary test on some of the most basic and essential words used in the Bible. Try some of these: salvation, redemption, hope, faith, reconciliation, love, joy, peace, apostle, disciple, worship, fellowship, resurrection, life, death, holiness.

I hope you are *now* curious enough to check out some of these in your dictionary. Then go to a book like Vine's *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* and see what more is added to your understanding. Then write out your own definitions of these words, reflecting your own grasp of their import. Though it may sound boring, this can be a most exciting and enlightening exercise, one which can become a lifetime habit of being a good word detective.

Then there's grammar--important, but neglected. Perhaps you need a quick refresher on basic grammatical data. See Appendix A.

2. and 3. Asking Interpretive Questions and Thinking Through to Conclusions

It seems that some of us read the Bible without ever asking ourselves a question. Whether we think it is unspiritual to do so, or whether we have been brainwashed by biblical dogmatism, or whether we are just lazy-minded, the net result is the same. With this unthinking approach we will never become good Bible interpreters. I believe the Lord likes to have us ask questions, for this gives him the opportunity to give us answers. I honestly believe we cannot read the Scriptures intelligently without having a flood of questions.

Let's Try It!

For example, our Lord Jesus said to his men in the upper room:

Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in me will also do the works that I do, and greater works than these will he do, because I go to the Father (John 14:12).

Here's one for us to interpret. For what he says seems so contrary to our experience, we hardly know whether to take him seriously, at first. But if we start to ask questions, hopefully the light will begin to dawn. Here are

some questions that come to mind. They are in italics so that you can follow my thinking.

First I note that our Lord's words tell me he is intensely serious: "Truly, truly, I say to you...." This is a literary device like, "Now hear this! Now hear this!" He's trying to get our attention. So I begin seriously to confront the issues. My mind says, *What does he mean by "he who believes in me"? Does this refer to our initial faith which made us Christians, or does it refer to an ongoing faith?* I observe that he is trying to encourage his men in the life they face after he leaves, so I take it to be an emphasis on the latter, that is, "he who believes" is the one who, at each occasion, keeps on trusting him for enabling power and thus will be enabled to do the same things he has done. *And what had he done?* He had made lame men walk, blind men see. He even raised some from the dead! *And were these early disciples to be able to do that?* Well, the record of the Acts of the Apostles declares that they did.

But then I ask, *Why did our Lord do these things?* And it becomes clear, as I review the record, that he invariably had a deeper intent than physical healing. His greater concern was for the redemption and healing of the human soul and spirit. If this were not so, I think he would have set up a Jerusalem Healing Clinic, and everyone would have been healed. His aim was deeper than physical healing. He asked such questions as, "Which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven you,' or to say, 'Rise and walk'?" (Luke 5:23). He thereby sought to shift his hearers' thinking from the physical to the spiritual level.

So I conclude his meaning in the text we are interpreting is that they would not just be able to do what he had done, but that their doing so would be for the same purpose, and fulfilling the same plan, as he had in mind. As I view his miracles, I see that he did all under the direction of his Father, and only as required to fulfill his plan. I learn this from the immediate context, "Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority; but the Father who dwells in me does his works." And the broader context of John's Gospel (see John 5: 19, 6:57, 8:38, & 12:49, 50).

What, then, is the purpose of his miracles? I see the answer in Luke 4: 17-21 (italics mine):

...and there was given to him the book of the prophet Isaiah. He opened the book and found the place where it was written, *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."* And he closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant, and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

in accord with our Lord's answer to John the Baptist in Matthew:

Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples, and said to him, *"Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?"* And Jesus answered them, *"Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is he who takes no offense at me"* (Matt. 11:2-6, italics mine).

Our Lord was (in Luke 4) presenting the credentials of his Messiahship, and John the Baptist was given those credentials in Matthew 11. Here we have moved to the larger context of the New Testament and even further, to the whole Bible, in the quotation Luke makes from Isaiah 61: 1, 2. As a result, we see that the miracles of Jesus were the documentation of his Messiahship, to authenticate that he was truly the Christ, sent from God. We further conclude that the miracles of the apostles were a similar authentication of their being "sent ones" from God, which is the meaning of the word *apostle*.

Going to the next phrase of John 14: 12, we face the really tough part: "...and greater works will he do..." The obvious question that comes to mind is, *What are the greater works?* And how are they greater-- in number or degree? To answer this we further observe that he gives a reason for this statement of fact: "...because I go to the Father." So the next question is, *What difference will his going to the Father make?* Then we recall that his departure meant his going to the cross, his coming back in resurrection life, his sending of the Holy Spirit to

indwell and empower the church, and his ascension to the right hand of the Father to intercede for his own. His disciples thought they were *losing* when he went away; he said they were *gaining* --that it was advantageous to them for him to go. From our vantage point in history, we can no doubt see this better than they did at the time he spoke these words.

So where are we now? *What are the greater works? Are they greater in degree or in number?* To answer the latter, I would suggest they are greater in *both* degree and number. *What is greater than the physical miracles?* Certainly the miracles of spiritual healing made possible by the cross, resurrection, and intercession of Christ. The Lord sought to make plain throughout his earthly life and ministry that the soul and spirit of man are far more important than the body, though he does not disdain the human body. And when one reviews the history of the Christian church, starting at Pentecost when some three thousand were saved and thinking through to the penetration of the gospel worldwide (including the fact that from eleven men it reached us nineteen centuries later and half a world away) it's not hard to see the greater works he envisioned, greater both in number and in degree, bringing eternal salvation. Nothing like what we can review in the history of the church ever occurred in our Lord's earthly ministry. And all this, "because I go to the Father," he said.

I think we have arrived at a fair understanding of what Jesus had in mind for his men in the upper room, but how does it apply to us today? Well, first we should observe that in John 17, our Lord prayed *for his own* who were with him then, but he also extended his prayer *to include all of us who are his* (see John 17:20). And if we take careful note, we see that in this upper room ministry, our Lord was laying the foundation of the church, instructing his men so they might understand what was happening when they came to the day of Pentecost, when the Spirit of God joined together the first members of the body of Christ to form the church. So, by extension and application, I believe the Lord would have us understand that believers in our day are empowered to do anything and everything he has in mind to further his redemptive purposes in the world--but only under his direction, enabled by his power, and consistent with his character and purpose. Finally, note that the next subject he introduces (in John 14:13, 14) is *prayer* --the expression of our utter dependence on him to do what he says he will do.

So we've tackled a rather difficult verse of scripture, asked our interpretive questions, and reached some conclusions as to its meaning. If you feel as I do about it, it is humbling, challenging, and exciting--even in the process--but well worth the effort. Look at the open door of ministry this verse represents in its total import, if we believe it. What a charter for encouraging and motivating us to action in cooperation with our Lord!

4. Anchoring our Interpretation in the Application of Interpretative Principles

In summary, note how we employed some of the principles of Bible interpretation in the course of our study. We applied particularly the rule of context, observing the local, larger, and total biblical relationships. Though we could have gone further in this, we gained enough to answer our interpretive questions with some degree of understanding. We inquired into the purpose of miracles, looked at the Messiahship credentials of the Lord Jesus, and entered into the purposes of God in the church.

We did not apply *all* the interpretive principles we have listed, but we used the ones that were necessary to arrive at a satisfactory conclusion. That's all we ever need to do, for our aim is to recover the meaning of the author or speaker, not just to get exercise in the use of rules.

We could go much further into this particular study, and I have done so on my own; but what I have described here is, I trust, sufficient to illustrate the process without wearing out your patience.

In all of this investigative action, we need to remember that:

- The Bible is meant to be understood, for these are things God has revealed to us that we might know the things he has freely given to us.
- It contains much that is easy to understand.
- It has depths of meaning and portions that are hard to fathom.
- It leaves some questions unanswered.
- But we can gain from it all we really need to know to live fulfilled lives in right relation to God and to

man.

My friend and fellow pastor, David Roper, is a master at asking interpretive questions. See the [Appendix](#) for his questions on 2 Timothy 1 and 2.

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