



# Joyful And Ardent Labor In The Scriptures

Studying the Bible with humility and reverence.  
Studying to get to know God in truth, then live accordingly.

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## **Safeguarding Yourself from Misinterpreting the Word of God**

A friend once asked me whether Bible passages take on new meanings for the Christian who undertakes graduate work in biblical exegesis. My answer was that the implementation and practice of what is learned, supposing the courses are sound, surely can correct and refine the student's present understanding of Scripture as well as become a safeguard against further misinterpretation, but take on new meanings?

"New" in the sense of, "Wow! Till now I didn't know that's what the ancient penman meant by what he wrote"? Yes.

Grasping the intended meaning of the Word of God comes by the grace of God preeminently through steady and regular reading, devotionals, and studies in *and obedience to* the Word of God (cf. Ps. 119:97–104; cf. also John 14:21–24). De-emphasize it at your own risk, but if you want to keep discovering what the Bible means by what it says then live obediently to what you already understand correctly.

Can Bible passages take on "new" meanings in the sense of meanings different or distinguished from that intended by the Author? No.

The meaning the LORD intended to convey by the words and symbols used by the penmen of Scripture cannot and does not change (cf. Num. 23:18–20; Ps. 33:10–11, 89:34–35, 119:89, 152, 160; Mal. 3:6; Matt. 5:17–18; John 10:34–36; Heb. 6:16–20; James 1:17). Scripture simply is not able to mean something today that was not in the LORD's intent then. Therefore, true—and safe—Bible study is to labor to determine accurately the conscious intent of the LORD's ancient penmen.<sup>1</sup> And not until we have determined conscious intent can we derive *legitimate* implications and principles, perceive personal significance, then make proper application of the passage to our own lives.

Let me be definite: It is impossible to be too careful or meticulous in your treatment of the Word of God, from seeking its intended meaning, to applying it, to preaching it. That is one reason it takes as long as it does for new articles to appear on JAALITS.com (cf. Prov. 19:2, 29:20). Absolutely no good can come from mishandling the Scriptures. At worst, it will be to your own destruction (2 Pet. 3:15–16). At best, it will leave you (and your audience!) with a distorted or warped view of any number of things biblical, from the character of God, to the content and method of evangelism, to how to choose a church, all the way down to how to think and why.

On that ground, consider the following as a beginner's guide to interpreting Bible texts accurately and applying them properly.

## I. Preparation: Am I Qualified?

### A. Am I an actual Christian, a Christian as described by God in the Word of God?

1. If I have not come to the Lord Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of my sins and eternal life, if I am not in union with Him, then I neither accept the things of the Spirit of God nor possess the ability to know them as intended (1 Cor. 2:14; cf. 2 Cor. 3:14–16). The Bible is a closed book to me, period. Worse yet, if I will not come to Christ Jesus for mercy (John 5:39–40), then I will receive divine justice (cf. Matt. 22:2–7).

### B. Am I living obediently to what I already understand correctly in the Word of God?

1. Whether an infant Christian or mature, episodes of sinful behavior halt my ability to take in anything beyond the elementary or introductory teachings of the Bible for as long as that behavior continues (1 Cor. 3:1–4).

### C. Though I must employ the tools of biblical interpretation (e.g., original language aides; reference works on Bible geography, history, manners, and customs; Bible dictionaries; commentaries), am I in humble dependence on *God alone* to open my mind so I can understand the Scriptures? (Ps. 119:17–19, 27, 73, 124–125; Luke 24:45)

### D. Am I desirously willing to obey whatever else God may teach me in His Word? (Ps. 86:11–12, 119:33–40)

## II. Interpretation: What I Meant by What I Said When I Said It

### A. Who is the writer of (or who is speaking in) the particular text I am studying?

### B. Historically to whom are these words addressed?

### C. In the light of the context (i.e., the preceding and following verses or chapters associated with and the historical setting of my text), what is the writer (or speaker) consciously intending to convey to his original recipient(s) (or audience) and why?

## III. Recognition: What Is the Link Bridging Past to Present?

### A. What explicit or implicit timeless biblical truth(s) or principle(s) does my text contain?

1. To attempt this step without having first determined the interpretation will be irresponsible if not precarious.
2. The timeless truth or principle cannot and will not be inconsistent or incompatible with or repugnant to either the context or the interpretation.

#### IV. Correlation: How Does It Relate Today?

##### A. How does this timeless truth or principle relate properly today?

1. Proper connections to the present cannot and will not be inconsistent or incompatible with or repugnant to either the biblical context or the interpretation.

#### V. Application: Put It to Use in My Own Life

##### A. Can this truth or principle be applied properly to me or my situation specifically?

1. Proper personal application cannot and will not be inconsistent or incompatible with or repugnant to either the biblical context or the interpretation.

##### B. If proper personal application is possible, then what change(s) needs to be made in my life in the light of this timeless truth or principle?

##### C. How can I, by God's enabling, make this change?

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> As the divinely inspired and preserved written record of the eternal God speaking through humans (e.g., 2 Chron. 36:21–22; Acts 1:16, 28:25; cf. 2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 3:15–16) and to humans (e.g., Gen. 4:6, 6:13, 12:1, 31:3; Josh. 3:7; Judg. 7:2; 1 Sam. 3:11; 2 Kings 10:30; 2 Chron. 1:11; Job 42:7; Jon. 4:9; Acts 8:29, 9:10, 18:9), sometimes dictating, as it were, the words (e.g., Exod. 34:27; Deut. 31:19; Isa. 8:1, 30:8; Jer. 30:1–2, 36:1–2, 27–28; Rev. 2:1–3:22, 21:5) and visions (e.g., Ezek. 43:11; Hab. 2:2; Rev. 1:11, 19; cf. Exod. 25:1–31:11 [esp. 25:9, 40, 26:30, 27:8]; 1 Chron. 28:11–19), the objective of *safe* and *sound* biblical exegesis is to arrive at the conscious intent of those God chose to write down His word. Anything other (e.g., semantic autonomy, reader-response criticism) is to supplant divine objective authority with personal subjective anarchy. Authorial conscious intent is mined out, by God's grace, by the grammatical-historical method of interpretation, taking account of literary genre (e.g., apocalyptic, historical narrative, parables, poetry) and devices (e.g., symbol, irony, hyperbole, euphemism, anthropomorphism).

For introduction to the matter of the interpretive method(s) used by the writers of the NT when they quote, adapt, apply, and appropriate OT texts, see Jonathan Lunde and Kenneth Berding, eds., *Three Views on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008).

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