

# Understanding and Interpreting the Bible

By Dave Jenkins | Servants of Grace

One of the greatest privileges of the Christian life is reading the Word of God. But reading the Bible isn't just about flipping through pages—it's about understanding the meaning of what God has spoken. This requires interpretation. Not because Scripture is unclear, but because God gave us His Word through real people, in real places, at real times, using real languages. The process of interpretation isn't something for seminary professors alone. It's for every Christian who opens their Bible and wants to know, trust, and obey the Lord.

## Why the Bible Requires Interpretation

### 1. Historical and Cultural Context

The Bible didn't drop into a vacuum. It was written by individuals inspired by the Holy Spirit in specific historical settings. Understanding the culture, geography, customs, and events surrounding a passage helps us better grasp its intended meaning. For example, commands to ancient Israel regarding ceremonial cleanliness must be understood within the covenantal framework of the Old Testament, not simply applied directly to modern Christians.

### 2. Diverse Literary Forms

God inspired Scripture using a variety of literary genres—narrative, poetry, prophecy, wisdom literature, gospel, and epistle. Each of these genres follows different conventions. Reading Proverbs requires a different approach than reading Galatians. Recognizing these forms prevents misinterpretation and helps us appreciate the richness of God's communication.

### 3. Language and Translation

The Bible was originally written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. While we are blessed with excellent English translations, every translation is itself an act of interpretation. Certain words or phrases don't carry over neatly. That's why using tools—study Bibles, lexicons, commentaries—can be helpful in illuminating the original meaning and protecting against misunderstanding.

### 4. Ongoing Relevance

Though the Bible was written in ancient times, its truth is timeless. The task of interpretation helps bridge the gap between the original context and our present-day application. As culture changes, we must remain grounded in the unchanging truth of Scripture while thoughtfully applying it to contemporary life.

## Seven Principles for Faithful Interpretation

1. **Know the Genre** – Identify the type of literature you're reading. Understanding genre sets the tone for how we interpret.
2. **Pay Attention to Context** – Read what comes before and after a verse. Always consider the flow of thought and how it fits within the chapter and book.
3. **Start with the Plain Meaning** – Let Scripture speak clearly. Avoid overcomplicating or reading in hidden meanings. Most texts say what they mean.

4. **Seek the Author's Intent** – Ask: What was the original author intending to communicate? What would the first audience have understood? Avoid starting with, “What does this mean to me?”
5. **Study the Language** – Dig into key terms. Even if you don't know Greek or Hebrew, solid Bible tools can reveal how certain words are used elsewhere in Scripture.
6. **Look for Theology** – Every passage reveals something about God, man, sin, salvation, or the gospel. Don't rush to application—ask first, “What truth is God revealing here?”
7. **Keep God at the Center** – The Bible is God's revelation of Himself. It's not primarily about us. Keep your eyes on Christ and how each passage fits into the redemptive story.

## Final Thoughts

Interpreting the Bible is not a burden—it's a joy. It's part of our discipleship and worship. Whether you're a pastor preparing a sermon, a Bible teacher leading a small group, or a Christian reading in your quiet time, the call to interpret Scripture faithfully is the same. We don't come to master the text, but to be mastered by it.

Let us open God's Word with reverence, humility, and a deep desire to hear from our King. As we do, may the Holy Spirit help us rightly handle the Word of truth and grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ.

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