

# ***How to Interpret Scripture Why Is Interpretation Needed?***

Lesson #6 for May 9, 2020

Scriptures: Luke 24:36-45; 1 Corinthians 12:10; 14:26; Acts 17:16-32; John 12:42-43; Hebrews 11:6.

1. *To read the Bible* also means to interpret the Bible. What do we mean by that? You are creating ideas in your head as you read. That is interpretation. There are many different types of stories, miracles, parables, even prophecies in Scripture, each of which needs to be understood in light of its context.

2. There are many ways in which the Bible can be misused.

For instance, when a husband left his wife for another woman, the wife got great assurance when she found the following text: “And I will put enmity between you and the woman” (*Gen. 3:15, NKJV*). She was convinced, based on that verse, that her husband’s affair would not last!—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide\** for Sabbath, May 2.<sup>§</sup>

3. Any text read or quoted without a context quickly becomes a pretext for one’s own agenda and ideas. It is very easy to take a portion of a text or just a part of a story and interpret it in one’s own ways, coming up with one’s own conclusions, often in complete contrast to what the biblical context and history suggests. Guess who would love to suggest ideas of his own to misinterpret Scripture! The Devil did it even to Jesus in the temptations in the wilderness, and he will certainly do it to us.
4. What factors normally affect us as we open our Bibles and begin to read? One of the largest factors is presuppositions—ideas that we have that may be correct or totally in error but which we believe to be true and which influence how we interpret what we read.
5. The story of how the Pharisees and Sadducees misunderstood Jesus is an excellent example. The disciples themselves had very clear ideas about what they believed the Messiah was supposed to do. And they could not even consider the possibility that He would die as an accused traitor on a cross.

**Luke 18:31-34:** <sup>31</sup> Jesus took the twelve disciples aside and said to them, “Listen! We are going to Jerusalem where everything the prophets wrote about the Son of Man will come true. <sup>32</sup>He will be handed over to the Gentiles, who will mock him, insult him, and spit on him. <sup>33</sup>They will whip him and kill him, but three days later he will rise to life.”

<sup>34</sup> But the disciples did not understand any of these things; the meaning of the words was hidden from them, and they did not know what Jesus was talking about.—American Bible Society. (1992). *The Holy Bible: The Good News Translation\** (2nd ed., Luke 18:31-34). New York: American Bible Society. [How was this possible?]<sup>†</sup>

6. Each one of us has a worldview, or a *paradigm* as it is sometimes called, which is a set of beliefs which he or she is very comfortable with and into which he or she will always try to

fit any new idea. If a new idea does not fit, often that new idea will be ignored or rejected.

7. There are many biblical critics who philosophically reject the idea that God can predict the future or that He can work supernatural miracles. If one takes that approach, then there will be large portions of Scripture that s/he will reject out of hand.
8. In fact, when studying new ideas, it is almost always harder to set aside the old ideas that may conflict with new ones than it is to accept totally new ideas. Old concepts and beliefs are very difficult to change.
9. Christians, however, have a secret weapon: The Holy Spirit can help us to open up and correct our limited preset perspectives and presuppositions.

**John 16:13:** When, however, the Spirit comes, who reveals the truth about God, he will lead you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own authority, but he will speak of what he hears, and will tell you of things to come.—*Good News Bible*.\*

10. Are there certain concepts that you hold that make it very difficult for you to accept some of the teachings in Scripture?
11. It is well known that the Bible was originally written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Koine Greek which was the common Greek in the time of Paul and the other apostles. Very few people, in fact, are able to read those ancient languages today. Even modern Greek is considerably different from the Koine Greek of the Bible. As we know, any language that people use changes over time. Greek is no different, nor is Hebrew or Aramaic.
12. Any good translator knows that no matter what the two languages are that s/he is dealing with, translating from one language into another requires interpretation. In fact, every language has some words in it that no other language exactly matches. So, interpreters or translators must struggle to present the ideas that are presented in one language as clearly as possible in the second language. That skill is called **hermeneutics**.
13. Read 1 Corinthians 12:10; 14:26; John 1:41; 9:7; Acts 9:36; and Luke 24:27. These passages make it very clear that when translating from one language to another, skill is needed. Luke 24:27 suggests that Jesus Himself had to make the Old Testament clear to some of His extended disciples, even though they spoke Aramaic, and presumably Hebrew.

The Greek word *hermeneuo*, from which we have the word *hermeneutics* (biblical interpretation), is derived from the Greek god Hermes. Hermes was considered to be an emissary and messenger of the gods, and as such was responsible for, among other things, translating divine messages for the people.—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide*\* for Monday, May 4.<sup>§</sup>

14. **But, there is an extra challenge in translating passages from Scripture. We not only expect people to get the correct wording and idea across, but also we expect them to change their lives in accordance with what they have learned!**
15. Many languages have multiple translations of the Bible; but, there are still a number of groups in our world who do not have even a small part of the Bible in their language. So, how should we deal with multiple translations if we have them in our language? There are probably more than a thousand different translations of at least a portion of the Scriptures

in English. How do we choose the right ones to read and study?

16. No matter what translation we choose to read, we will need the Holy Spirit to guide us in our understanding of what we are reading.
17. Read Acts 17:16-32. Paul had been chased from city to city in Macedonia as he was trying briefly to spread the good news in each city. Finally, he was forced to flee and ended up in Athens. He walked around Athens for a few days and realized how many idols and false forms of worship they had. So, he began to talk to them about a better kind of religion. He praised them for being very religious! But, then he pointed out the problems with their religions. Fortunately, a few were convinced; but, most were not.
18. This illustrates the fact that a knowledge of Mediterranean culture is very important for understanding some biblical passages.

For example, **Hebrew culture attributed responsibility to an individual for acts he did not commit but that he allowed to happen. Therefore, the inspired writers of the Scriptures commonly credit God with doing actively that which in Western thought we would say He permits or does not prevent from happening, for example, the hardening of Pharaoh's heart.**—"Methods of Bible Study," section 4.p., par. 3. at [www.adventistbiblicalresearch.org/materials/bible-interpretation-hermeneutics/methods-bible-study](http://www.adventistbiblicalresearch.org/materials/bible-interpretation-hermeneutics/methods-bible-study).<sup>\*†</sup> [for this to work you must copy and paste the link]

19. Some biblical critics try to dismiss the Bible, claiming that it was applicable only to the people who lived back in the days when it was written. That could be a real problem. Some want to translate Scripture based on their own cultural ideas. But, the salvation which Jesus offered is certainly not limited to one time or to one group of people.
20. In trying to make his speech relevant to the Greek intelligentsia, Paul pointed out that his religion recognized that all people came originally from a single couple, Adam and Eve. Thus, we are really all members of a large family. And God is the Creator of all. Salvation can appeal to any person in any culture at any time if we allow it to do so.

As a parallel, think about algebra, which was first invented in the ninth century A.D. in Baghdad. Does this mean, then, that the truths and principles of this branch of mathematics are limited only to that time and place? Of course not.—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide*\* for Tuesday, May 5.

21. It is true that understanding some of the ancient Mediterranean cultures and ideas helps us to interpret Scripture. This does not mean that the Bible is applicable only to people who lived in those days. The Bible has universal application.
22. Read John 9:39-41 and 12:42-43. Many of us think that we have carefully thought through our ideas and beliefs. We feel that we have an open mind and can fairly evaluate any new idea that comes along. But, we need to remember that sin has radically altered, ruptured, and fractured our relationship with God. Sin and its corruption can be detected in our thinking: Pride, self-deception, doubt, distance, and disobedience are often the result.
23. For example, a proud person might decide that he or she is capable of judging Scripture for himself/herself, thus, elevating his/her human reason above Scripture. He may listen only to ideas that are attractive to him, even if they are directly in contradiction with ideas

from the Bible. Unfortunately, Revelation 3 makes it clear that at the end of this world's history, a group of people who claim to be Christians will have a very erroneous idea of their condition.

**Revelation 3:17:** "You say, 'I am rich and well off; I have all I need.' But you do not know how miserable and pitiful you are! You are poor, naked, and blind."—*Good News Bible*.\*

24. If we take the approach that it is our job to judge Scripture, we will never come up with the right conclusions. Can you think of a time when you found yourself fighting against conviction based on something you read in the Bible?
25. Our lesson is entitled: "Why Is Interpretation Needed?" An excellent example that gives a partial answer to that question is found in Nehemiah 8:1-3,8.

**Nehemiah 8:1-3,8:** <sup>1</sup>By the seventh month the people of Israel were all settled in their towns. On the first day of that month they all assembled in Jerusalem, in the square just inside the Water Gate. They asked Ezra, the priest and scholar of the Law which the LORD had given Israel through Moses, to get the book of the Law. <sup>2</sup>So Ezra brought it to the place where the people had gathered—**men, women, and the children who were old enough to understand**. <sup>3</sup>There in the square by the gate he read the Law to them from dawn until noon, and they all listened attentively....

**<sup>8</sup>They gave an oral translation of God's Law and explained it so that the people could understand it.**—*Good News Bible*.\*†

26. This was the first modern language translation of Scriptures that we know about. Notice the effect it had on the people!
27. If our salvation is dependent upon a correct understanding of Scripture and, thus, a correct understanding of God, what else could be as important as that? (Matthew 16:26) For Seventh-day Adventists who have already claimed that they believe in the Bible, the most important question in the great controversy is, "**Can God Be Trusted?**"
28. It might seem impossible, but, even in the early church in the days when Peter and Paul were still active, **errors apparently were creeping into the church.**

**2 Peter 3:15-16:** <sup>15</sup>Look on our Lord's patience as the opportunity he is giving you to be saved, just as **our dear brother Paul** wrote to you, using the wisdom that God gave him. <sup>16</sup>This is what he says in all his letters when he writes on the subject. **There are some difficult things in his letters which ignorant and unstable people explain falsely, as they do with other passages of the Scriptures.** So they bring on their own destruction.—*Good News Bible*.\*†

29. It is very interesting to note that Peter, who may have been in the Mamertine Prison in Rome along with Paul when he wrote or dictated 2 Peter, already considered Paul's writings as Scripture. Why do you think that was? Or, when Peter used the term *Scripture*, did that only mean *writings*, writings which may or may not have been inspired?
30. If we Seventh-day Adventists are going to claim the Bible and the Bible alone as our source of truth, rejecting false tradition, creeds, or human authorities, then we must develop a very careful and reliable hermeneutic. Without a correct interpretation of the

Bible, there could be no unity of doctrine or teaching; the church would lose direction. A bad and distorted theology would result.

31. **Seventh-day Adventists have claimed for many years that our job is to present the three angels' messages found in Revelation 14:6-12 to the world. Do you have a clear understanding of how to interpret those verses so that they are understandable to your neighbors?** Look at a couple of examples that might impact how we are to interpret those key words in Revelation 14.
32. What is the wrath of God? **The *wrath of God* is His turning away in loving disappointment from those who do not want Him anyway, thus, leaving them to the inevitable and awful consequences of their own rebellious and destructive choices.**
33. And what about the *fires* described in the third angel's message?

To sin, wherever found, "our God is a consuming fire." Hebrews 12:29. In all who submit to His power the Spirit of God will consume sin. But if men cling to sin, they become identified with it. Then the glory of God, which destroys sin, must destroy them.—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*\* 107.4.

**The glory of His countenance, which to the righteous is life, will be to the wicked a consuming fire.** Because of love rejected, grace despised, the sinner will be destroyed.—*The Desire of Ages*\* 600.2.†

34. God is the only source of life. If He must leave us because of our sins, we will die.
35. How do we manage to set aside our preconceived ideas and accept the teachings of Scripture?

**In your study of the word, lay at the door of investigation your preconceived opinions and your hereditary and cultivated ideas. You will never reach the truth if you study the Scriptures to vindicate your own ideas. Leave these at the door, and with a contrite heart go in to hear what the Lord has to say to you.** As the humble seeker for truth sits at Christ's feet, and learns of him, the word gives him understanding. To those who are too wise in their own conceit to study the Bible, Christ says, You must become meek and lowly in heart if you desire to become wise unto salvation.

**Do not read the word in the light of former opinions; but with a mind free from prejudice, search it carefully and prayerfully.** If, as you read, conviction comes, and you see that your cherished opinions are not in harmony with the word, do not try to make the word fit these opinions. Make your opinions fit the word. **Do not allow what you have believed or practised in the past to control your understanding.** Open the eyes of your mind to behold wondrous things out of the law. Find out what is written, and then plant your feet on the eternal Rock.—Ellen G. White, *Youth's Instructor*,\* July 24, 1902, par. 7-8.† Compare *Messages to Young People* 260.1-2.

36. Do you have a clear understanding about how sin has impacted our interpretation of Scripture? What has happened to us since the days of Adam and Eve when they walked

with God in the garden? What makes it impossible for us to even see God without being destroyed? God has not changed; we are the ones who have changed! (Exodus 34:29-35)

37. You may have heard of people sometimes saying that they are going to spend a certain period of time living as the Bible teaches, literally, without taking into consideration the context and the reasons why things happened as they did. This can lead to such a distorted picture that it makes the Bible look silly. So, what is the problem? First of all, you need to understand clearly what the Bible said; ideally, you would know Koine Greek, ancient Hebrew, and Aramaic. And you should know them well enough so that you understand the subtle implications often found in sentences.
38. Different churches and different denominations exist even though they all claim to live by the Bible. This demonstrates that some form of interpretation has taken place in all of us.
39. There are some who will take a single verse or even a few words and read into those few words what they want to believe. There is a fancy Greek word for that called ***eisegesis*** which means putting one's own interpretation on God's Word. It is very much frowned upon by careful Bible scholars. What we need to do is to try to discover what the Bible originally intended by a given passage and accept that through a process called ***exegesis*** where we get the meaning from the Bible instead of reading meaning into the Bible.
40. All of us have a worldview or a paradigm into which we try to fit all the realities that we recognize around us. If we keep an open mind and spend sufficient time in reading the Bible, praying, and in witnessing to others—which challenges us to have a clear understanding of what we have read and studied,—then our worldview will grow and develop.
41. What happens when a person is converted? This will often require a significant change in a person's core ideas and beliefs. We might call that a "fruit basket upset" in one's thinking or a *paradigm shift*. This is almost certainly what happened to Paul after his experience on the Damascus road. Later, he went into the Arabian desert for a period of time.

**Galatians 2:16b-19:** I did not go to anyone for advice, <sup>17</sup>nor did I go to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before me. Instead, I went at once to Arabia, and then I returned to Damascus. <sup>18</sup>It was three years later that I went to Jerusalem to obtain information from Peter, and I stayed with him for two weeks. <sup>19</sup>I did not see any other apostle except James, the Lord's brother.—*Good News Bible*.\* [What did they, the Pharisee and the fisherman, talk about?]<sup>‡</sup>

42. Think about the impact that the encounter with Jesus on that walk to Emmaus had on those two disciples, and later, on the rest of the disciples as the two explained to them what had happened. How difficult was it for the people who had been following Jesus to give up their idea that He would become the Messiah they wanted to help them conquer the Romans? Try to imagine yourself sitting among the disciples as they struggled with this incredible change in outcomes from what they expected to what actually happened!
43. Having talked about the issues of translation, interpretation, and hermeneutics, we need to conclude by talking about different translations or versions of the Bible. A very literal word-for-word translation is almost impossible to understand. For one thing, the Hebrews wrote from right to left while we write from left to right. But, some attempts at a formal translation make excellent study Bibles. Examples of such Bibles might be the *New Revised Standard Version*, the *New American Standard Bible*, 1995 revision, the *New King*

*James Version*, and others that are similar. If you took one of these translations and translated it back into Hebrew, assuming you could do that, you might come up with something close to what the original Hebrew said.

44. There are also dynamic translations that emphasize meaning-for-meaning instead of word-for-word equivalents. In those, the translation is restructured into idiomatic usage representing the equivalent thought or meaning in our language. These are much easier to follow and understand. For many people, of course, how reliable that version is depends on the translators. There are times when, despite their best efforts, the results clearly do not match what we believe the original text said.
45. Then there are paraphrases. Paraphrases such as the *Message Bible*, the *Living Bible*, etc. are best used when one wants to read a large portion of Scripture to get a general idea what it is talking about. They are also good for those who just want to read through the Bible over a period of time. For serious Bible students, it would be ideal to have one of the more literal translations available and, alongside it, perhaps one of the more dynamic translations such as the *Good News Bible*.
46. How much influence should we attribute to the culture in which the biblical writers were writing?

“The biblical writers insist that the theological message of Scripture is not culture-bound, applicable for only a certain people and a certain time, but permanent and universally applicable.”—Richard M. Davidson, “Biblical Interpretation” in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, ed. Raoul Dederen (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), p. 85.—[as quoted in *Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide*\* 83].<sup>‡</sup>

47. If we spend our time focusing on how different the cultures were in Bible times from our own culture today, it might seem like that is too big a gap. **But, God knows how to communicate over time.** And He offers us the Holy Spirit to guide us. But, God forbid that we allow blindness of heart to influence our understanding of Scripture.

**Ephesians 4:17-18:** <sup>17</sup> In the Lord’s name, then, I warn you: do not continue to live like the heathen, whose thoughts are worthless <sup>18</sup>and whose minds are in the dark. They have no part in the life that God gives, for they are completely ignorant and stubborn.—*Good News Bible*.\*

48. Even after one has done his/her very best to try to understand Scripture, there might be times when a disaster hits the family or some other problem arises, and our faith is shaken. How can we avoid letting our faith be shaken under such circumstances? It might seem like there are a lot of pitfalls in coming to understand and know the Bible. But, if one belongs to a group of fellow believers who can help you understand what you have read, it is a great aid.
49. Have you found a translation with which you are comfortable? Do you have other translations available for times when you want just to read or perhaps want a more dynamic equivalent?

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