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**Eight Key Questions for Interpreting the Bible - Part 2**

By Tal Davis

In Part One of this two part series, we examined four questions that need to be answered in order to competently interpret the Bible. We discussed the fact that many people read or study Scripture, or participate in study groups, without really having a knowledge of the essential principles of biblical interpretation (hermeneutics). They often just guess at a passage's meaning, read it through their own predetermined opinion, or look to some external (sometimes erroneous) authority. These approaches are wrought with the danger of not getting at what the divinely inspired authors of the Bible really intended.

In the first installment, we looked at four basic issue that we need to start with in order accomplish our goal of properly understanding a verse or passage in the Bible. Those initial four questions were:

1. Where does the passage occur in the history of God's revelation?
2. What does the passage say in its original language?
3. What type of literature is the particular book or passage?
4. What is the book's and specific passage's historical and geographical setting?

Go to this link on MarketFaith.org to read the answers to these questions in Part One: <http://www.marketfaith.org/2020/09/eight-key-questions-for-interpreting-the-bible-part-1-tal-davis>

Let's begin this installment by addressing one of the most important elements in the interpretation

of a Bible verse or passage. It is also one of the most often ignored hermeneutical principles, even by sincere Christians. What is it? Context!

It is common practice to lift certain verses or passages out of a book of the Bible and quote it to make a point of doctrine or ethics. We all do it. And that is perfectly fine usage of the Word of God. However, we cannot legitimately do that unless we have first established that the text really says what we think it does in its biblical contexts. Therefore, we must always take into account the two kinds of contexts of a particular verse or a passage when studying it.

**5. What is the general context of the passage?**

First we must analyze the general context of the passage where it appears in relation to the totality of the book. All Bible books have overarching purposes for their composition. Understanding the writer's ultimate theme helps us know the relevancy of any one verse or passage extracted from it. For example, when Paul wrote his letter to the Galatians, he was concerned about the growing influence in their midst of Judaizers who were distorting the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith. So, when we quote a verse from that epistle we must keep that primary thesis in mind.

Another example is the book of Hebrews. The writer's overarching purpose was to present to His believing Jewish readers the fact that Jesus was the High Priest who offered Himself as the Perfect Sacrifice for sins. His usage of Old Testament imagery and highlights of characters of faith were intended to demonstrate Jesus' superiority to anything spoken about in the Old Testament.

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So, if we quote a verse out of Galatians, Hebrews, or any other book in Scripture, we must understand how it fits into the overall theme of the book. Otherwise we run the danger of thinking a specific verse means something other than what the original author, under Divine inspiration, intended when he wrote it.

Consulting a good Bible handbook, commentary, or dictionary will aid with this goal. Be sure, however, the entries in the handbook, commentary, or dictionary are from legitimate evangelical scholars. It helps to check the authors' biosketches and the publishing houses of the volumes.

Be especially careful if the authors or the publisher are unfamiliar to you or they do not provide information on the writers' qualifications. You may want to GOOGLE the publisher to see if it is connected to any specific religious group or denomination. For instance, the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society (Jehovah's Witnesses) publish a two volume Bible dictionary called *Insight on the Scriptures*. Of course, it defines everything in complete accord with Jehovah's Witnesses' cultic theology.

So, knowing the general context is crucial. Nonetheless, there is also a narrower context that we cannot overlook.

### 6. What is the specific context of the passage?

The other contextual dimension involves analyzing a word, phrase, or passage in the specific context of the chapter where it is located, and with other verses surrounding it. It is easy just to quote a verse out of context to proof-text an idea. However, we must not be guilty of ignoring what the full chapter and passage says leading up to it and following it.

Specious proof-texting is a common practice of cults and sectarian groups who deceptively quote verses out of their context (or sometimes quote verses that are not even in the Bible). In some cases they can make it appear to mean something that was never intended by the author. For instance, some religious groups like to quote John 3:5 as proof that baptism is necessary for salvation:

*Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." (NASB).*

Yet when we look at that verse's immediate context of Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus (John 3:1-21), it says absolutely nothing about baptism.

Don't be too quick to judge, however. We can be just as guilty of this charge as anyone. For instance, how often do we quote Matthew 18:19-20 as a command of Jesus to pray together in pairs or small groups. It has been the basis for many a sermon on prayer.

*"Again I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven. For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst." (NASB)*

The truth is, however, if we look at the specific context of these verses, we see that Jesus was not talking about prayer at all. He was addressing the problem of dealing with a brother in the church who has sinned and needs correction or discipline.

Also, to reiterate, we must beware when we hear a Bible teacher make the claim that she or he has discovered the hidden "keys" to understanding the real meaning of the Bible. For instance, Herbert W. Armstrong claimed that he discovered the "Key of David" in Revelation 3:7 that unlocked

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to him the previously unknown meaning of all Bible prophecy.

*"And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: He who is holy, who is true, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, and who shuts and no one opens..." (NASB)*

And what truth did Armstrong say that key opened? Just the totally absurd and debunked belief that the throne of the king or queen of England is the true inheritor of the throne of King David. Thus, the English are the true people of Israel, not the Jews. Thus, all Bible prophecies about Israel actually apply to Great Britain and the British Commonwealth. No qualified Bible scholar would give that theory any credence.

Another example is Mary Baker Eddy, founder of Christian Science. She claimed that she had discovered the key to the true metaphysical meaning of the Bible. In her book, *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*, she asserts that the literal meaning is inadequate. It requires her "spiritual" interpretation to reveal the underlying deeper understanding. Her methodology violates every legitimate principle of biblical hermeneutics.

The point is, the Bible is not a "hidden" book, nor are there "deeper truths" or "special keys" to be found. The Scriptures should be studied in light of the clear and plain meanings of the words and phrases. Difficult passages, and there are some, should be interpreted in light of the obvious passages, always in their proper contexts.

That being said, God has not left us entirely to our own devices. This leads to the next question.

## 7. How does the Holy Spirit help us understand the passage's meaning?

The seventh principle of Bible interpretation is a bit more subjective

than those above, but cannot be divorced from them. When we study the Bible, we must always ask the Holy Spirit Himself to make clear in our minds the meanings and applications of passages we investigate. This is what we call "Illumination." (Actually, the Holy Spirit is involved in all of this process.) It is the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit (the same Holy Spirit who inspired the authors) that enables Christians to read and understand the meaning of Scripture. Jesus Himself promised the "Helper" (*Paracletos* - AKA: "the Counselor"; "the Comforter"; "the Advocate"), that is, God the Holy Spirit would lead us into the truth (See all of John 14-17).

*"But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you." (John 14:26 NASB)*

The Apostle Paul indicated that only Christians, illuminated by the Spirit, can adequately understand the truths of God. The natural minded person (non-Christians) cannot comprehend them since they do not have the Spirit.

*But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised. But he who is spiritual appraises all things, yet he himself is appraised by no one. For who has known the mind of the Lord, that he will instruct Him? But we have the mind of Christ. (1 Corinthians 2:14-16 NASB)*

So the Holy Spirit, God Himself, is our supernatural guide in studying His divinely inspired Word. That does not mean we can ignore the other principles. He works in and through this whole process to reveal His truth.

Now we have examined seven principles for accurately interpreting the Bible. But just knowing what it says is never enough. There is one other question we must answer.

### **8. What do we need to do to correctly apply this passage to our lives?**

*All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness.* (2 Tim. 3:16 NASB)

The ultimate purpose for Christian Bible study is our personal application of its truths in our lives. In fact, all the previous seven answers are useless and a waste of time unless we are willing to answer this one. Certainly, scholarly study of Scripture is a necessary thing. The process of interpretation helps us to get to the real meanings of Scripture. Nonetheless, a purely academic Bible study, as is done in secular universities and liberal theological seminaries, is inadequate for Christians. Our primary motive for learning the Bible is to determine what it means practically for sound doctrine, morals, and ethics.

That being said, there is an old saying, "There is only one right interpretation, but many right applications." Though there may be only one correct interpretation of any Bible passage, it may actually have many applications. It depends on the situations of life. While the absolute principles derived from Scripture never change, they may apply to many different life circumstances.

So, we have examined eight essential questions that, when correctly answered, address how we can adequately interpret the Bible. God has revealed His truth to us in the Bible, and we want to know what He has said clearly. Interpreting it is a quest we can all accomplish if we are willing to take the time necessary to investigate what it really says and means. But above all, we must purpose to put the Bible's teaching into action in our lives.

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