

Sermon Notes of Rev.Dr.I.J.W.Oakley (10-12-2002 Framsdén Baptist Church)

Psalm 119:105 (part iii)  
Additional reading: Psalm 119:89-112, 129-136

### Interpretation of the Bible

#### Introduction

Interpretation is very important. The Bible benefits us only if we understand it, and that depends on whether we interpret it correctly. Correct interpretation is necessary to enable us to know God and His will, to help us to live the Christian life, and so that we can effectively communicate His Word.

We need to be scrupulous, make use of God's provision of the Holy Spirit, and apply the rules of interpretation we apply to other writings and every day speech. As a result of neglecting the proper rules of interpretation, some preachers can get the most amazing meanings from the Bible, and gullible congregations fall for it. For example, some have managed to find in John 5:1 a call to discipleship (because of the reference to the "Sheep Gate"), to baptism (signified by the "pool"), and of course the five points of Calvinism (the five covered colonnades)! Someone has used the three baskets on the bakers head in Genesis 40:16 to expound the doctrine of the Trinity, and even a sermon on entire sanctification from Joseph's words to his brothers "The old man of whom you spake, is he yet alive?"!

Yet interpretation of the Bible is difficult, and there is no perfect agreement by everyone on most things. Three problems arise – (a) the historical gap – the last book in the Bible was written 1900 years ago, (b) the cultural gap – written originally for people in the Near East with different outlook and ways of expression, and (c) the linguistics gap – the Bible was written in Hebrew and Greek, with different forms and structures from our own language.

#### Approaching Biblical interpretation

Someone seeking to interpret Scripture accurately must have the right mental and spiritual qualification. Spiritual truth is only revealed to those with a spiritual nature. By nature, our minds are darkened. The new birth is essential for man to see the Kingdom of God (John 3:3).

William Grimshaw was the vicar of Haworth in 1742, and was already in the ministry before he was actually converted. Up till that time, it was said of him "If God had drawn up his Bible to heaven and sent him down another, it could not have been newer to him."

After conversion, dependence on the Holy Spirit is essential to grow in spiritual understanding. The Holy Spirit who inspired the Scriptures must also illuminate the readers' minds. As we respond in obedience, so He gives more light. We must bring to God a humble and reverent mind. **God guides the humble in what is right, and teaches them his way** (Psalm 25:9).

**If anyone chooses to do God's will, he will find out** (John 7:17). There is a danger in finding in the Bible what we want to find, if our minds are already made up about its message. It is not easy to be unbiased and strictly honest. We can approach the Bible with a set of beliefs and look into the Bible to find proof texts to support our system. Then we bend or twist or overlook texts which do not quite fit in.

Charles Simeon wrote, "There is not a decided Calvinist or Armenian who equally approves of the whole of Scripture... who, if he had been in the company of Paul while writing his epistles, would not have recommended him to alter one or two of his expressions.... Therefore, be Bible Christians, and not System Christians."

We need to be honest about our prejudices, and honestly admit we do not have perfect answers to problems. It is all right to admit, "I don't know". Let the Bible writers speak for themselves in the full range and variety of their teaching.

We must be aware that we often read the Bible through coloured spectacles, i.e. our friends, background, early teaching, church, respected preachers, needs and reactions all influence us. For example, total abstainers from alcohol have argued that "little wine" in 1 Timothy 5:23 must be for external application only!

At the same time we need to be hard working. Charles Simeon again writes, "For attainment of divine knowledge we are directed to combine dependence on God's Spirit with our researches. Let us not presume to separate what God has thus united." Therefore we must not oppose the two. God's guidance is partly through our researches, and then the Spirit also shows us how the truth applies to us. Paul advised Timothy, **Reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this** (2 Timothy 2:7), i.e. human and divine sides together. Do not separate what God has joined.

It is obviously important to have as much information as possible. Hence translations, commentaries and Bible dictionaries have their place. Though much of the Bible is simple enough for a child, these tools are very valuable for the more difficult parts. Do not overlook writers of the past. Be aware of twentieth century Christian history. Do not ignore what the Holy Spirit has shown to others, though do not be enslaved to them or treat their writings as on the same level as Scripture.

**I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ** (Ephesians 3:17,18). We are better off than ever before, and than most other countries, in terms of Bible helps. The deeper our conviction that we are handling the very Word of God, the more serious and painstaking we shall be in our research. God may bless poor exegesis of bad translation of doubtful reading in obscure minor prophet – but that is no excuse for us to be slovenly and lazy in approach. If we are honest and hard working, and if we use sound principles of interpretation, we shall find that far from manipulating Scripture, it will be controlling us.

Therefore we need the Word and the Spirit. We cannot separate the two. Humble yourself before both. Study the Word for its meaning, but ask the Spirit to enlighten you. Prayer and study go together.

### General principles of interpretation

Firstly be sure of what the Bible actually says. There is no substitute for the original language and textual criticism, but even with them, there is no perfect agreement among scholars. But the vast majority rely on translations. Use several translations, because no one translation can convey all that is in the original. Be aware that the Authorised Version, dating from 1611, was based on a few late manuscripts. But we now have 14,000 manuscripts of all or parts of the New Testament. Since 1947, we have Old Testament manuscripts a thousand years older than we had before. Also, about 300 of the words used in the Authorised Version have changed their meaning since 1611. But while the Authorised Version may be technically imperfect, its essential meaning is not different.

Secondly, always consider what the passage meant to the original readers before you try to apply it to today. The Bible was not lowered down from heaven, complete with black covers. It is rooted in history. Who wrote it? When? Why? What was the writer's intention? Try to think yourself back into the time and situation of the readers. For example, the term "Son of Man", used 80 times in the Gospels, speaks to us of the humanity of Christ, but consider what the term meant to Christ Himself, and His contemporaries. When interpreting 1 Corinthians 11:10, about women having their heads covered, remember that the Eastern veil was a symbol of the husbands authority, more akin to our wedding ring than to a western hat. And ask why do the hat specialists neglect the reference to the holy kiss and foot washing?

Some of the references in the old books of the law also need to take account of the culture. Deuteronomy 22:5, banning women from wearing men's clothing, is a reference to magical practices in heathen religion, or to transvestism associated with sexual perversion. Prohibition of clothing with wool and linen (Deuteronomy 22:11) is also reference to magical practices; just as cutting the hair at the sides of your head or clipping your beard (Leviticus 19:27) refers to pagan mourning ritual. These are just examples, to make you aware of the potential for misinterpretation.

### The character of the writing

Some questions need to be asked. Is this history, poetry, parable, psalm? Is the language literal or figurative? Take these, for example: "All flesh is grass", "Man shall be turned into blood", "Beware of dogs", "Heap burning coals on his head". Also beware of Eastern idioms. When Jesus required His disciples to "hate" his father and mother (Luke 14:26), "hate" only means "love less" – there were no greys in Hebrew thought, only black and white, hence the use of "hate".

When describing God, who is spirit, obviously anthropomorphic language is used to help us understand – hence reference to His hands, eyes, walking in the garden, coming down to see the Tower of Babel.

Parables also need careful exegesis. The question to be asked is, what did Jesus mean by the parable in light of the context? Normally we look for one main point and not expect to spiritualise every detail. Never base doctrine on the details of a parable.

Remember that Eastern thought is not as precise as ours, and terms are often symbolical. Some examples of this: Sometimes “father” just means “ancestor of”, as “son” may mean “descendant of”. “Sons of Levi” refers to priests. “Three days and three nights” is a common Jewish phrase for a short period of time (Matthew 12:40). Beware of the use of round numbers – they may be precise, or they may just mean “several” or “many”. Numbers are sometimes used symbolically and not precisely in Near Eastern literature, e.g. seventy times seven (Matthew 18:22), meaning forgive without limit.

Lists of names and genealogies are not always complete. They are selected by writers to serve their purpose. Historical statements, sermons and speeches are summaries of what was actually said and done. **Jesus did many other things as well. If everyone of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for all the books that would be written** (John 21:25). Writers also adapted material for their readers’ usage. Matthew’s readers were Jews, so he used the term “kingdom of heaven” where Mark and Luke, writing for Gentiles, used the term “Kingdom of God”.

Always interpret according to context. Forget chapter and verse divisions, since these were added later, and are in places quite arbitrary. Ask what happened before and after. Cults are notorious for taking phrases out of context and making from them what they want. See the words of Satan and of Job’s comforters in the context of the book.

Some words and actions apply only to a certain individual, and are not for all to follow to the letter. The rich young ruler was told to sell all he had and give it to the poor (Mark 10:21). But it is not incumbent on us in the letter of the law. Just because Jesus was baptised in the Jordan does not mean that we all should be baptised in the Jordan.

Notice how individual writers use words. If people realized James and Paul use “justification”, “faith” and “works” in different ways, they would not claim they contradict each other. In the phrase “do to the least of these my brethren” (Matthew 25:40), to whom does “my brethren” refer? Does it mean every man, or the Jews during the time of great tribulation? Elsewhere in Matthew’s Gospel, Christ’s brethren are his disciples, as in **Go tell my brethren** (Matthew 28:10).

### Conclusion

We have just begun to show that there are many things to be taken into account when interpreting the Scripture. Rules have to be applied, as with any interpretation, and there must be an awareness of prejudices. Context is always vital, and finding out what other minds have said about a passage is very useful. At all times depend on the Holy Spirit as well as your own research and investigation.