

## How to Interpret the Bible – Lesson Two

### Studying God's Word

#### A. Use the immediate context

Many of the rules of interpretation found in the following pages are not derived from a Scripture passage. They are simply commonsense rules of interpretation, which apply to any book. Therefore, you will not always find a section of Scripture quoted to back up the point being made.

The first rule of Scripture is one that you instinctively follow as you read a Sunday newspaper or best-selling novel. You let the context determine the meaning of the passage.

Use the immediate context—the verses immediately before and after the verse you are thinking about—to help you determine the meaning of a passage.

#### Read John 3:16.

What is the meaning of *the world* in this verse? How does the context help you interpret those words?

#### Read 1 John 2:15.

What is the meaning of *the world* in this verse? How does the context help you interpret those words?

#### B. Use the wider context

Sometimes only the wider context of Scripture will help you discover the meaning of a verse. The wider context might include other sections of the book you are reading, other writings by the same author, or the Bible as a whole.

#### Read John 21:15.

1. What might the word *these* refer to in the immediate context?
2. Read John 13:37,38; Matthew 26:33. What is a better interpretation of the word *these* in light of these passages?
3. In the light of this discussion why can we say that regular Bible reading and studying help us grow in our ability to interpret Scripture?

#### C. Let clearer passages determine the meaning of more difficult ones

Some passages seem difficult or obscure. When you come across such a passage, be patient. Seek out other passages in Scripture that clarify the one you are having difficulty with.

#### Read Matthew 7:1.

Many want to use this passage to escape being labeled as sinners.

1. True or false: In Matthew 7: 1 Jesus tells us that under no circumstances should we ever judge anyone else's actions or motives. Before you answer this question, work through the following questions and use the context of Scripture to help you interpret this verse.
2. Read verse 2, the immediate context. What does it tell you?
3. Read verses 5 and 16, the wider context of the chapter. What light do these verses shed on our question?
4. Read 1Corinthians 5: 1-5, the wider context of Scripture. What light do these verses shed on our question?
5. Answer the question we started with. What is the meaning of Matthew 7: 1?

#### Read Romans 8:29,30.

Paul refers to God's foreknowing us and electing us to come to faith. These verses have been difficult for many to interpret. How does Ephesians 1:3-6; 11-14 help us interpret Romans 8:29, 30?

**Read 2 Peter 3:16.**

1. How does this verse encourage us to search patiently the whole context of Scripture in order to understand difficult passages?
2. Sometimes Christians may differ in their judgment on what a passage means. In some cases there is room for such differences of opinion. However all opinions must pass certain tests:
  - They must never confuse Law and gospel.
  - They must be based on a completely logical understanding of the text.
  - They must never contradict any statement of Scripture.
  - The reasons for the interpretation must come from Scripture itself.
  - The interpretation must say nothing other than what Scripture says in other places.

**Summary**

When you study Scripture, allow Scripture to interpret itself. Pay special attention to the immediate context of the verse under study. But realize that the verse may best be understood in the light of other passages of Scripture. In the case of passages that don't readily reveal their meaning, proceed patiently. Grow in a knowledge of God's Word: rule out wrong interpretations that go against clear teachings of Scripture; discover other portions of Scripture that may offer clues.

**During the week:** pick a book of the Bible and begin reading it, taking notes while you read, and praying before and after you read.