

How do we avoid misinterpreting Scripture?
August 22, 2021 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone



This morning we have another great question to consider –

Is there a 'right way' to study the Bible? How do we avoid misinterpreting it? How do we avoid potential pitfalls in interpreting Scripture?

That's a great question and really important for us to think about. As you know from a few weeks back, the Bible is very important to us as evangelical Christians. It is God speaking to us through His Word and so it the central authority in our lives. We want to understand it and apply it and live in light of it.

Admittedly though, there are parts that are hard to understand. It was written down a loooooong time ago, in a very different culture (in many different cultures I should say!) and so at times, it can be tricky to figure out exactly what any given passage is saying. But we want to put in the effort because God's Word is life-giving and good. 'A lamp to my feet and a light to my path (Psalm 119:105).'

So how do we go about reading the Bible in such a way as to avoid misinterpreting it?

I'm going to give you four thoughts today on how to correctly interpret Scripture and I'll give you some examples on the way of how to avoid misinterpretation. So if you want to write these down, go right ahead. Here are my four principles for correctly interpreting the Bible:

Read it carefully.
Read it honestly.
Read it canonically.
Read it in community.

Those are my four points for avoiding potential pitfalls in interpreting Scripture. So let's take those one at a time.

First, read it carefully.

Have you ever been reading, any book really, but especially the Bible, when you've been reading for a bit and then have to stop and say, 'wait, what did I just read?' We get going and our eyes are seeing the words on the page but for some reason, the meaning of the words just isn't registering in our brains. And you gotta go back and focus and read it over again so you can understand what it's saying.

That happens. That happens when you read the bestsellers; it happens when you read the Bible. It happens to me. So when it does, you need apply the first principle.

Read the Bible carefully. With the fan on low as an old seminary prof of mine used to say. Or maybe shut it right off. John Piper used to say 'it's good to read the Bible in Greek because it FORCES you to slow down.'

Slow down and read the Bible carefully, because otherwise, you might miss what it's saying, or take something at face value without really understanding what it means.

Take John 14:14. Jesus is speaking to His disciples and He says – ‘you may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.’ Wow!, right? Ask Jesus for anything in His name and He’ll do it! That’s a pretty big statement.

Now if you’re blasting through the Bible and not really reading it carefully, you’re going to read that and go ‘wow, I can ask Jesus for anything and He’ll give it to me?’ Beach house in Maui here I come!

But hold on, let’s slow down and read that more carefully.

John 14, starting in verse 12, Jesus says - 12 I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father.

13 And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father.

14 You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.

Now if you’re just skimming the page, you might only catch verse 14 – ‘You may ask me for anything in my name and I will do it’ but that’s only part of what Jesus says. And there are at least three points in the previous three verses that mitigate against the ‘ask for literally anything you want and Jesus will give it to you’ understanding of that verse.

First – anyone who has faith in me – implies that a degree of faith is needed in the asking.

Second – anyone who has faith will do what I’ve been doing. The implication is that the asking will have to be consistent with and related to the work that Jesus has already been doing.

And third – the point of being given whatever you ask it not pleasing you but bringing glory to the Father.

The unspoken principle at the heart of ‘ask me for anything in my name and I will give it to you’ is that what you ask for will be consistent with the character and mission of God. Ask to be a blessing to the world and God provides; ask for a sports car, not so much. You might miss that though if you’re reading too quickly, so you need to slow down and really pay attention to what the Bible says.

One of the most important ways to avoid misinterpreting Scripture is to read it carefully.

A second crucial way to avoid misinterpreting Scripture is to read it honestly.

I remember a colleague once asking me – ‘do you let the Bible speak for itself or do you twist the Bible to make it say what you want it to say?’ And that’s a good question that has stuck with me. We all bring preconceptions and assumptions about the world to the Bible and it can be really easy to read those into the text. Confirmation bias is another issue here – we only recognize passages that agree with what we already believe.

But if we’re going to interpret the Bible rightly, we really need to do it honestly – to lay aside our preconceptions and do our best to truly hear what it is that God is saying in His Word.

Cory Powell puts it well – he writes – “The Bible should constantly challenge us to reconsider our preconceptions. It should upset us, it should make us uncomfortable, it should shame us. If we want warm fuzzies, we should look elsewhere.”¹ We want to listen honestly to what God has to say.

For example, I think that many people, even Christians, would balk what I said last week about having a sin nature. The prevailing view in our culture is that we are all 'good people' and we resist any idea that says otherwise.

But then you come to a passage like Ephesians 2 that we saw last week and we have a choice. Read it honestly and trust that God knows what He's talking about or read it in line with our own cultural assumptions and frankly, come away with something that's not biblical.

Here – just listen to it – 'As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, 2 in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. 3 All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath' (Eph 2:1-3 NIV).

Now if I read that through our cultural lens of 'we're all good people,' then I'm going to bring to it the idea that there must be exceptions. This must be talking about a subset of the population, the bad apples, the malcontents, the sociopaths in our society.

But what does it say here? ALL OF US lived like that at one time. [WE] and [ALL THE REST]. We were all dead in sin, chasing after sinful desires. And think about who it is that's saying this? Paul, the most radically righteous religious authority of his time. If anybody could boast about being 'good,' it was him. And yet, he says 'no, we all have this nature that leads us away from God.'

If we're going to read the Bible honestly, then we need to lay aside our assumptions and biases and do our best to read God's Word the way He intended. And that actually is an important trick to interpreting the Bible correctly. Authorial intent. What did the author mean when he wrote it down? Because that's where the meaning lies.

Whenever I'm doing sermon prep, I'm always asking 'would Paul or Peter or James or whoever wrote this down agree with what I am saying? Am I capturing what they wanted to say in a way that is consistent with their intention and meaningful given our current circumstances?' That I think is really helpful in being honest – asking, 'is this truly what the author meant?'

If we're going to read the Bible honestly, then we need to lay aside our assumptions and biases and do our best to read God's Word the way He intended.

So, to avoid misinterpreting the Bible, we need to read the Bible carefully; we need to read the Bible honestly; we also need to read the Bible canonically. That is, we need to read each part in light of the whole. You can't just take one passage and pull it out of its context; you need to read it in light of everything else the Bible says.

So to give you an example – about twenty years ago, there was a very popular book called 'The prayer of Jabez.' The author took two verses out of the Bible – 1 Chronicles 4:9-10 – and he wrote a book saying 'if you would just pray like Jabez did, then you will be blessed like Jabez was.'

Here's the verses - 9 Jabez was more honorable than his brothers. His mother had named him Jabez, saying, "I gave birth to him in pain."

10 Jabez cried out to the God of Israel, "Oh, that you would bless me and enlarge my territory! Let your hand be with me, and keep me from harm so that I will be free from pain." And God granted his request. (1Ch 4:9-10 NIV).

Now the author took these two verses and wrote this book saying – if you will just pray this prayer like Jabez did, then God will increase your possessions, enlarge your territory and keep you free from harm so that you will never experience pain. In the introduction, he writes "I want to teach you how to pray a prayer that God always answers."ⁱⁱ Not surprisingly, the book sold nine million copies, because that's the sort of the thing that people want to hear.

But is that what the Bible says? Is that consistent with the witness of the whole of Scripture? Remember here, we're not just going to read one verse and gain our meaning from that; we need to read a verse in light of the whole Bible. And what does the Bible say?

Job 14:1 "Man born of woman is of few days and full of trouble."

1 Thessalonians 3:3 "You know quite well that we were destined for trials."

Jesus Himself says – John 16:33. "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

It's just not realistic to think that life could be free from pain.

And then what did we learn about prayer a few minutes ago? That we should pray with faith, in line with Jesus' will, to the glory of God the Father, not for greater possessions and territories.

I mean, the fact that this is in the Bible means that we can learn from it and the prayer of Jabez certainly teaches us to be bold and intentional in our prayer before God but I think that we also have to hold it in tension with the reality that God's priority is not our material prosperity but our spiritual well-being. He's more concerned with saving the world than making me comfortable but you need more than two verses to understand that, which is why reading Scripture canonically is really important.

So, to avoid misinterpreting the Bible, we need to read the Bible carefully; we need to read the Bible honestly; we need to read the Bible canonically; and we need to read the Bible in community. With other people.

We absolutely need to read the Bible as individuals but we also need to read it in tandem with others for two reasons – first, those other people both bring new perspectives to what you are reading and second, those people will also guard against misinterpreting the word.

First, new perspectives - It never ceases to amaze me when we gather together for Bible study, someone will make some kind of observation of the text that I've never seen before. I've got all sorts of notes in my Bible – so and so said this; so and so said that. Why? Because they're seeing from a perspective that I can't see. I'm a white forty something male with a university education; that shapes how I see the world and it keeps me from seeing things that a younger or older person, a person of colour, a woman would see. And it's only when we listen to each other that we are going to really grasp the fullness of the Bible. When we read in community we gain perspective.

But at the same time, we hold each other accountable. We work together to evaluate our perspectives. When we read Scripture in community, then we can stop and say – wait, is that really what that says? The “The prayer of Jabez” guy really needed to have somebody from a Third World country or a good seminary to step in and say ‘wait, is that really what the passage means, in the flow of the Bible?’ Reading the Bible in community is a good way to evaluate these different perspectives and cling to the ones that really reflect biblical truth.

Brian Wright writes – “Communal reading is an effective but neglected safeguard against misquotations, misinterpretations, and misapplications. It’s almost impossible to misquote a movie line or name the wrong player on a sports team without someone noticing and correcting it because so many people are viewing these events. Imagine that same type of thing happening with the Bible in your community... Communal reading helped preserve the precise passing down of God’s revelation, while also providing additional checks and balances to interpretation” (2 Peter 3:16).ⁱⁱⁱ

That’s why it’s important to read with others, to hold to a common rule of faith, that is consistent with the message of the Bible. So it’s important to take part in Bible study, it’s important to read books by Christians in other countries, it’s important to read books by Christians who have come before us. I love reading historical Christian work because they lack the cultural assumptions I have and so speak from a very different point of view into our reality. We are altogether the Body of Christ and we benefit each other when we work together to understand the Bible better.

To avoid misinterpreting the Bible, we need to read the Bible carefully; we need to read the Bible honestly; we need to read the Bible canonically; and we need to read the Bible in community. Those are my principles for understanding the Bible better.

But you know what? As we close, I’m going to add one more. To avoid misinterpreting the Bible, we need to read the Bible.

I suspect that the majority of misinterpretation happens because people just don’t read the Bible. They know enough to sound religious but they haven’t actually listened to God speak through His Word. They’re more shaped by the world around them than by God’s Word to His beloved people. Don’t be like them.

Instead, set aside time to spend time with God in His Word. Psalm 119 says that the Bible is sweeter than honey, making us wiser than our enemies, our teachers, our elders. God shows us in His Word His commitment to us and His plans for our lives and we thrive when we live in light of them. Yes, read the Bible carefully and honestly and canonically and in community, but most important of all, just read it.

ⁱ <https://medium.com/corybantic-blog/some-thoughts-on-reading-scripture-honestly-d74c7a8d06c0>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.challies.com/articles/the-bestsellers-the-prayer-of-jabez/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/read-the-bible-with-someone-else>