

# Feeding on God's Word

*How to study the Bible: Part III*

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## Interpretation

Do you know that many men paid with their lives to give you the privilege of interpreting the Bible for yourself? Just owning a Bible in your own language is a privilege that not many have enjoyed through the centuries. God has given us this privilege to use. It is our responsibility to study His Word and learn it.

The first step in studying the Bible is *observation* – learning to look carefully, seeing details you overlooked before. This is like chewing food. The better your food is chewed the easier it is for your body to digest it. Digestion is like the second step in Bible study, *interpretation*. Observation gathers the details: facts, questions, and insights. Interpretation brings meaning and organization to these observations and answers to your questions. You must continue to ask and write down questions and observations during this stage, but now you start to answer your questions. You don't start by going through your list of questions one by one, but as you interpret you will find many of the answers are there. If you would have not asked the question you wouldn't have recognized the answer and it would have passed by unnoticed. With the question in your mind you will pick up the answer as it comes along in your interpreting. For a doctor this is the diagnosis stage when conclusions are drawn. The same is true of the detective and scientist who must make sense out of the information they have gleaned.

How do we do this in Bible study? The key to correct understanding of the Bible is to put yourself in the place of the writer and read his mind. What did he have in mind? Why did he write this? What would he say it means? The technical term that covers all this is "hermeneutics." Whole libraries are filled with books on this subject but we will summarize some of the most important principles to use here.

*Let scripture interpret scripture.* The Bible cannot contradict itself. When interpreting the Bible, your conclusion must be consistent with all other Scripture. Because God is the author of the Bible, His message is in complete harmony and agreement with itself. Here are some principles to follow in order to make sure you interpret correctly:

### 1. Let the bible be its own interpreter

Don't jump to wild conclusions or read in what you assume or have heard. Look at each word clearly and objectively, as if reading it for the first time. Interpret the Bible in its natural sense according to the rules of grammar. The meaning of a word is tied to the sentence by the rules of grammar. Analyze it as you would an English grammar assignment.

### 2. Take the word in its usual sense

The Bible is literature and as such, words must be taken at face value. It is to be interpreted literally. This is how Jesus understood the Old Testament. He literally interpreted it down to a comma (in Luke 4:14-30, quoting Isaiah 61:1-2) and verb tense ("I Am" in Matthew 22:23-33). This means we aren't always to look for hidden, "spiritualized" meanings everywhere. To the other extreme, we aren't to take it so literally we miss what the writer had in mind. For instance, "hot dogs" can mean one thing in a literal sense and another in its normal, usual sense. Use your common sense in determining the meaning. Figurative

language is something we can talk about later, so don't worry about that for now. Just read the Bible as you would a letter from a friend.

3. Take the word in the sense that the whole sentence indicates

If a word by itself is unclear (like "hot dogs"), look at the sentence it is used in and let that help determine the meaning. Derive the meaning out of the sentence, don't read into it. Again, put yourself in the writer's place and read his mind.

4. Take the word in the sense which the context indicates

If you can't tell for sure what a word means by its sentence, then look at the whole paragraph or chapter for its context. Keep in mind the historical times in which the writer lived. Customs, culture and daily life were much different then than now. Books like "Manners and Customs of Bible Lands" by Fred H. Wight (Moody Press) can be helpful this. This is very important if you are to accurately put yourself in the writer's mind. Studying the way life was back then can be a very rich and rewarding part of your study.

5. The object or purpose of the whole book must be considered

You should have a feel for this from your observation time of reading, outlining, titling, etc. Understanding the mood, the tone, the spirit of the passage is important, too. The atmosphere is intangible but very real. Is there excitement, despair, awe, thanksgiving, urgency, joy, humility, tenderness - whatever? Sometimes there are a variety of swift changes within a passage, too. For example, background music on TV shows, commercials, and movies communicates a lot. In the Bible you sometimes have to read between the lines (which is different from reading something into the text that isn't there). With practice and relying on God's Spirit, you can certainly "hear" it.

6. Consult parallel passages

This is a last result, not the first thing to do. This is when the cross-references in your Bible come in handy, but not before you have done what is listed above. Cross-reference verses are often listed in the margins of your Bibles or in the footnotes, so look for them there. When using references, first of all look at those by the same biblical author, then those in the same historical frame, and the rest last.

These general rules apply to all interpretation, but for our passage in Mark 14:3-11 we will look at some specific principles that apply to interpreting one type of Bible literature: history.

## **Interpreting History**

History refers to those portions of the Bible that give information about people, places, events, groups or time periods. Genesis through Ruth and Matthew through Acts are mainly history. Today, though, we have historical books and novels and biographies.

First of all, let's go back to our analogy of eating. After chewing, food is digested. The mouth and saliva start breaking down the food into small pieces, but the digestive system breaks it down into something useful for the rest of the body. Various foods are broken down by different enzymes. Some foods digest quickly (like carbohydrates) and others slowly (like fats). The process differs for different kinds of foods. So it is with Bible study. Interpreting history is different than doctrine, or poetry, or prophecy. It is a bit of a different process for each. The easiest to digest is history.

Use the principles above to determine the meaning of works in historical sections. Bible dictionaries (such as "Unger's Bible Dictionary" or "The New International Dictionary of the Bible") can offer excellent, easy-to-

find helps. To help you in your own study, though, it is good to use the following questions to help you find answers yourself:

- *Who* is involved?
- *When* in history did it happen?
- *Where* was it located?
- *What* happened?
- *What* was life like then?
- *How* did it happen?
- *How* did it affect them?
- *Why* did it happen?
- *Why* is it recorded for us?

Sometimes it can be very helpful to look up information about the person, place or time in a concordance to see what other passages may shed light on the one you are studying. If there are many passages about your study area go through them all. List everything the passages say (good or bad) and put the reference behind the fact. Then divide the list into positive and negative lists. Try to further group the facts within each column. Write a sentence summarizing your findings in each group. Combine these to form a paragraph about each column.

Remember to keep adding to your list of observations all the time. Periodically go back through them and answer the ones you can. Keep doing this throughout the interpretation process.

### **In your Spiritual Journal:**

1. Now it's up to you to get to work applying this information. There is no substitute for hard work! Open your Bible to Mark 14:3-11 do your observation if you haven't already done it. Then interpret any words you aren't sure of, and answer some of the questions above about the passage. Soak it thoroughly in prayer, and expect a thrill – you'll get one!
2. Record your interpretations in your Spiritual Journal. Also share them with your other small group members.