

- 7) Encouragement for God’s people to remain faithful and persevere, looking to the future with hope that is rooted in faith

Numerous extrabiblical writings are apocalyptic, but two canonical books fit this genre: Daniel and Revelation. Other biblical writings include apocalyptic passages that are embedded within works that are mostly historical narratives or prophecy.

- Interpret apocalyptic passages in light of other Scriptures, not vice versa.
- Be very cautious in how closely you identify symbolic language with past or present events.
- Remember that at least certain symbols are clearly pointing to the future.
- Though apocalyptic writings often point to the future, there are also many principles that can be applied to present faithfulness.
- Remain humble, teachable, and agreeable.

Wisdom Literature

Wisdom literature collects the sayings of those whom the biblical authors consider to be wise. The sayings might be debates between wise and foolish characters, short sayings about wise living, or reflections on significant issues. Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes are part of this genre. Many other books of the Bible contain individual “wisdom statements” that should be interpreted similarly to wisdom literature.

- Remember that this genre focuses upon general principles and normal patterns more than promises.
- Often, wisdom literature is best interpreted thematically rather than sequentially.
- Interpret wisdom literature in light of other Scriptures, which can help provide a framework for rightly understanding and applying principles and patterns.
- If sayings seem to contradict themselves recognize they are speaking to two different valid principles that can each be applied faithfully, depending upon the circumstance.

Poetry

Poetry is common in the Bible, especially the Old Testament, and frequently crosses over into other genres, including proverbs, historical narrative, prophecy, and psalms. Normally, biblical authors write poetry for one of three reasons: (1) because it makes the words more memorable; (2) to express the author’s emotions; (3) or to induce strong emotions from readers. As in other languages, Hebrew and Greek poetry uses figurative or hyperbolic language, symbolic images, and mnemonic devices such as acrostics, repetition of similar sounds, and various types of parallelism.

- The original poetry is sometimes lost in English translation.
- Poetry is rarely intended to be interpreted literally, but rather points to general principles and/or means to evoke an emotional response from readers.
- Interpret poetic language in light of other Scripture, while also allowing the emotions of biblical poetry to prevent us from being too abstract or clinical in how we formulate biblical doctrines and principles.

Parables

- Biblical parables are short, normally fictitious stories that illustrates a spiritual principle by way of comparison with earthly examples. Approximately one-third of Jesus’s teaching is in the form of parables, normally illustrating kingdom priorities and ethics.
- Identify the main point or points rather than getting bogged down on the details of the story.
- Look for recurring imagery in Jesus’s parables.
- Allow the context of where the parable occurs in the Gospel to help you understand the point Jesus was making.

Epistles

Most of the books of the New Testament are epistles written by apostles and others who were closely

connected to apostles. Epistles are letters that were written to individuals, churches, or groups of churches. Epistles can have a main theme or themes, or they can be less thematic and more topical. Epistles are intended to be didactic.

- Understand the historical context of both the author and the recipients.
- Break the epistle into units (often paragraphs) to help us understand how each section relates to the whole.
- Look for key verses, as well as words or phrases that either recur or seem to carry significant importance within the epistle.
- Understand the logic of sentences, then paragraphs, then larger sections like chapters, then the entire epistle.
- Apply many of these same principles to groups of epistles written by the same author.

Meaning and Interpretation

In the field of biblical hermeneutics, there is a debate about who determines the meaning of the text. Some argue that the author or authors decide what the text means (authorial intention). Others argue that the reader decides what the text means (reader response).

Christians believe that every word of Scripture is dually authored. The Holy Spirit inspired each human author in such a way that the Bible is simultaneously the written words of God and the written words of man. Furthermore, the purpose of the Bible is to communicate God's truth to human readers in written form. For these reasons, most Christians reject reader response and affirm authorial intention.

Throughout history, Christians have debated whether a text can have more than one meaning. There are two extreme positions. One extreme claims that every text has one literal meaning and that there is no place for any additional layers of meaning. The other extreme claims that a text can mean many different things, with some meanings more literal and some more spiritual.

Our goal as interpreters is to find whatever meaning is already present in the text. Often, there is only one straightforward meaning. But at times, there are layers of

meaning. For example, a few Old Testament passages are intended to be read allegorically. Far more common than allegory is typology, when an Old Testament passage is intended by the author to foreshadow realities that are only fully understood in light of Jesus.

A good rule of thumb: allegory tries too hard to find *hidden* meanings in mundane details, while typology focuses on understanding *intended* meanings in biblical concepts ultimately fulfilled in Christ. As interpreters, we are not looking for hidden truths in the Bible intended only for the *really* spiritual readers, but rather are asking the Holy Spirit to reveal truths that have always been there and are intended to be known by all believers.

Application and Interpretation

Effective preachers and Bible teachers not only explain what the text means, but they show you various ways to apply that text to your life. Meaning without application can lead to “head knowledge” divorced from “heart knowledge.” Application divorced from meaning is just spiritual self-help advice or religious “life hacks.”

Six principles for application:

1. A text can only mean what the author intended
2. Though a text can only mean what the author intended, there might be any number of applications that can be drawn from the text
3. While some applications apply to all people (e.g. obeying God’s moral commands), other applications might vary from person to person depending upon their circumstance
4. The text’s meaning plus our particular contexts provide the boundaries for the potential range of appropriate applications
5. We should never confuse our applications of the text with the meaning of the text, or we make the Bible primarily about our felt needs rather than God’s written revelation of Himself to humanity
6. Our application should always aim toward our faithfully obeying the Cultural Mandate (Gen. 1:26–28; 9:1), the First and Second Greatest Commandments (Matt. 22:34–40; Mark 12:28–31) and the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18–20; John 20:21–23; Acts 1:8)

Recommended Resources

The ESV Study Bible

E3 Bible Study Method

Matt Rogers and Donny Mathis, *Seven Arrows: Aiming Bible Readers in the Right Direction* (Rainer Publishing, 2017).

J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God's Word: A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible*, 4th ed. (Zondervan, 2020).

Robert L. Plummer, *40 Questions about Interpreting the Bible*, 2nd ed. (Kregel Academic, 2021).
