

It is clear from Nehemiah 8:8 that this is exactly the way God intended His word to be handled. When God says in Genesis 2:10-14 that four rivers flowed out of Eden, they are four rivers, not four virtues.

This method of interpretation was critical to the Reformation when The Catholics were butchering the Bible with their bizarre interpretations. This method of interpretation was practiced by Martin Luther, John Calvin and Ulrich Zwingli. Roy Zuck observed that “The Reformers built on the literal approach...” (*Ibid.*, p. 44).

Martin Luther stressed this approach to interpreting the Bible. Again we cite Zuck, “...Luther stressed the literal sense (*sensus literalis*) of the Bible.” He went on to say that the Scriptures “are to be retained in their simplest meaning ever possible, and to be understood in their grammatical and literal sense unless the context plainly forbids.” He also concluded anything other than a literal interpretation was not worth “dirt” (*Ibid.*, p. 45). **He believed that every spiritually-minded believer could understand the Bible if he approached the Bible this way.**

John Calvin said that anything other than a literal interpretation was nothing more than “frivolous games.” Calvin said, “it is the first business of an interpreter to let His author say what He does say, instead of attributing to Him what we think he ought to say” (*Ibid.*, p. 47).

Ulrich Zwingli stressed that one must take the words literally in light of the context. He said to take a text out of its context is like “breaking off a flower from its roots” (*Ibid.*, p. 48).

William Tyndale (1494-1536) said, “Scripture has but one sense, which is the literal sense” (*Ibid.*, p. 48).

The Literal method of interpretation is that method that interprets the Bible literally understanding that the words mean exactly what they say in the most simple, direct and ordinary meaning, unless something in the passage suggests the words should be interpreted figuratively (i.e. Revelation 17:3/10-12; Daniel 7:1-3/17; John 2:18-20/21-22).

The literal method is that which accepts the words of the writer at face value in their normal, usual, natural, customary way of use. For example, when John writes “Jesus wept,” it means exactly that.

The literal method does not look for hidden secret meanings. It looks straight at the text. It attempts to understand the literal meaning and intent of the writer in view of the words he literally uses.

God put His word in written form and He did this so that man could learn about Him. Because God chose to use human language as His vehicle for communication, we interpret the language as literally as possible with the words the writer uses.

The Golden Rule of Literal Interpretation is this:

“When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense. Therefore, take every word at its ordinary, primary, usual, literal meaning unless the facts of the immediate context indicate otherwise.”

Ordinary language contains figures of speech; however, figures of speech are always given for communicating a literal truth. Whenever a figure of speech is used, it is for that purpose.

In a literal interpretation of the Bible, we realize and accept the fact that writers sometimes use figurative language; however, we also realize that any symbolic language is designed to communicate a literal truth.

For example, we realize that language uses:

1) Metaphors - a figurative quality or name given to something that cannot possibly have a literal applicability.

For example, in John 10:7-9, Jesus calls Himself a door. Well we know that He cannot be a literal door, but metaphorically He is the door to life in that one must go through Him. When Jesus said to His disciples in Matthew 5:13-14 that they were the “salt of the earth” and “the light of the world,” He did not mean they were literally a bag of salt or 100 watt light bulb. Interpreting something literally does allow for use of metaphors.

2) Similies - a figure of speech in which one thing is likened to another thing by a comparison to make a point. This uses words such as “like” or “as.”

For example, in I Peter 5:8 Peter says the Devil prowls around “like” a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. When we examine the context we observe that the Devil is a vicious being who is out to devour and crush a believer specifically through pride (I Pet. 5:6).

3) Allegories - a figure of speech in which one communicates a literal truth by using another story or illustration in an allegorical or figurative way to make the point.

A good example is Galatians 4:24. Paul specifically states that he is using the O.T. story of Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael and Isaac as an illustration of being under law versus being under grace (4:21, 31). Notice Paul says he is allegorically speaking and writing.

To actually come to an accurate, literal interpretation of a text, there are three areas of study that come into play.

QUESTION #10 – What are the three courses closely related to a literal interpretation of the Bible?

There are three main fields of study or disciplines closely connected to the study and literal interpretation of the Bible:

- 1) Hermeneutics;
- 2) Bible Study Methods
- 3) Exegesis.

QUESTION #11 – What is Hermeneutics?

Hermeneutics is the art and science of Bible interpretation. It is a science because there are specific rules that must be followed. It is an art because the more one practices the more skilled one will become.

The actual Greek word “hermenenia” (ερμηνια) and its verb “hermeneuo” (ερμηνευω) occurs some 19 times in the N.T.. The word literally means to give an interpretation and is used exactly this way in Luke 24:27, which means to give a thorough explanation, also I Cor. 12:10; 14:26 (G. Abbott-Smith, p. 180). **Interpretation is an accurate analysis and explanation of what actually is in a text of Scripture.**

Hermeneutics deals with the principles, which are necessary, in order to come to a true, accurate interpretation and understanding of a passage of Scripture. Hermeneutics is often closely related to Bible Study Methods, but it is not the same.

QUESTION #12 – What is the difference between Bible Study Methods and Bible Interpretation?

Bible study methods deals with how to study the Bible whereas Bible interpretation deals with how to interpret a text in the Bible. Bible study methods deals with study methodology with the goal of discovering the actual meaning; Bible interpretation deals with the science of how to analyze a passage to arrive at the actual meaning. To this point in our study, we have been looking primarily at Bible Study Methodology.

It is true that paths cross in these two disciplines; however, they are not identically or technically the same. When one wants to come to a true interpretation of a passage, the question is much more than how does one study the Bible; it is what do I need to do to accurately interpret the meaning of this passage?

Dr. Elliott Johnson said the difference between the two is this: Bible Study Methods is how do I go about to discover the meaning of the text and Hermeneutics is how do I know that I have discovered the true meaning of the text? (*Expository Hermeneutics*, p. 8).

When it comes to studying the Bible to interpret a text, Michael S. Heiser observed that “A better synonym for Bible study than ‘Bible reading’ would be ‘Bible research.’ And research isn’t easy. It takes tools, tenacity and time.”

It is important to realize that the Bible, as no other book, is God’s book but as all other books, it is a book for humans. God did inspire His word for people to read. The fact that it is God’s book demands the utmost care in coming to true and accurate interpretations.

The fact that it is a book for humans means that there can be many human misunderstandings and misinterpretations. It is precisely this point that demands a course like this.

Someone wisely said, **“hermeneutics should teach us to read the Bible as any other book and at the same time read the Bible as no other book.”**

The truth is although we have not taken a formal course on how to interpret a newspaper or a conversation, we have been doing this all of our lives. Every time we watch a program or read a book and follow the context or analyze what it is all about, we practice hermeneutics. For us, a system of hermeneutics is applied, but not formally studied or learned.

When it comes to God’s word, the stakes are much higher than us having a conversation with someone or reading a book about something which perks our interest. For one thing, the Bible was written at a different time, in a different language and in a different culture.

To properly interpret the Bible means we must crawl back into various contexts. One must know something about language, about culture and about history. We cannot superimpose our linguistic rules of English to rules of Greek or Hebrew because this will perhaps lead us to faulty conclusions. Furthermore, there are different spiritualities and different spiritual gifts that come into play, making the interpretation of a passage not just a simple academic matter.

But perhaps the most significant reason for studying hermeneutics is to clearly understand the true interpretation of God-breathed, God-inspired truth. If we do not understand the true interpretation of God’s word, we may be very sincere but also very wrong.

When it comes to the Bible, there are many that speak about a variety of important issues and then use the Scripture to defend their position. There are a variety of interpretations which cause confusion and as a result the average person is left with the idea that “one interpretation is as good as another.” “Your interpretation is as good as mine.”

In fact, Bible studies and small study groups are taking all kinds of forms and most “forget what a risky business it can be” (*Ibid.*, p. 8). One of the main dangers is that people go to some home Bible study and they tend to discuss some passage and what it means to them, without knowing what it means.