



# Biblical Interpretation 101

## SESSION 3

| *How can we interpret the Bible more faithfully?*

### Goal for the Session

The participants will interpret a passage of Scripture and will connect its interpretation to their own experiences and background, enhancing their knowledge of the process of biblical interpretation.

### Preparing for the Session

- Begin your preparations with prayer.
- Provide a copy of the Participant Handout for each participant.
- Prepare a flip chart paper or whiteboard with a chart as described in the “Who Are You?” activity of the “Opening” section.
- Provide paper and pens or pencils for each participant.
- Select a short passage of Scripture to use during the “Exploring” section of the study. Suggestions include Deuteronomy 6:4–9; Isaiah 40:1–8; John 1:1–18; Colossians 3:12–17. Have a Bible available.

### Teaching Tip

Because this lesson focuses on the fact that people interpret the Bible differently from one another, it is important to give time for individuals to explore their own interpretations. As a result, this session is focused on individual study done in the midst of a community. Remember that the inability to share and comment on the reflections of others can be a challenge for some of the participants. Comfort for these participants can be found in the knowledge of the plan for the session. As a leader, share the steps for the group as you proceed through the lesson. Consider posting an agenda for the session on a flip chart or whiteboard.

### Opening (10 minutes)

#### 1. Prayer

Holy God, we need only look around this room to appreciate and recognize the unique and special qualities you have given each of us. We have talents, experiences, and backgrounds that are provided through your all-knowing grace. As we explore how these traits affect and influence the way that we interpret your Word, we praise you for these uniquenesses and recognize your ever-present Spirit in this group; apparent through our listening and our speaking. **Amen.**

#### 2. Who Are You?

Invite the participants to create a simple chart that describes them. Introduce the prepared flip chart demonstrating the format, but describe the process as a relatively quick one. Encourage the participants to write down the first things they recall rather than spending a great deal of time thinking about their answers. Usually, the first reaction is helpful information to record.

Format the following descriptions into a chart, similar to a flow chart. An example is provided on the last page of this session.

Line 1: Your Name

Line 2: Your Relationships (for example, sister, mother, friend)

Line 3: Your Roles (for example, accountant, gardener, volunteer, elder)

Line 4: Your Traits and Characteristics (for example, compassionate, faithful, patient)

Line 5: Faith Milestones (for example, grew up unchurched, learned Bible as an adult, joined this congregation, became a member of a Bible study group)

After giving the participants a few minutes to finish, encourage them to keep this chart in front of them. You will be referring to it later in the lesson.

## Exploring (20 minutes)

### 3. Listening for the Scripture

Engage the group in a form of *lectio divina*, an ancient form of biblical study. Throughout this method, participants are invited into an opportunity to listen for what God's Word is saying in their own life. Begin by briefly describing the process whereby the Scripture will be read aloud two times interspersed with times of silence and with members sharing words and phrases they noticed in the reading. Encourage the group members to avoid talking among themselves and making comments about the words of other group members.

Invite the group into a period of silence, becoming centered on the process of listening for God. Then, read the selected Scripture passage aloud. Read slowly to allow the group members time to focus on the words. Allow silence.

Invite the group members to each share a word that got their attention.

Read the passage aloud again. Following the silence this time, ask the group members to think about what God is saying to them through the words of the passage.

### 4. Connecting

Continue the process of *lectio divina* by inviting the group members to jot down what they found God was saying to them on the chart paper from the earlier activity. Ask them to reread the chart, remembering their relationships to others, their roles, and their characteristics. Invite the participants to connect their background and important parts of their life to what God may be saying to them through the words of Scripture. The following questions may help the participants think through the connections:

- What did you hear God saying to you through the words of Scripture?
- What do you notice in your relationships, roles, and experiences that connect to what God has said to you?

- How does your background play a part in what you have heard?
- How might your interpretation be different if your experiences changed?

## Responding (10 minutes)

### 5. Living in Community

Up until this point, much of the session has been focused on the individual. As the Participant Handout stresses, much of the reason that the Bible is interpreted differently is because of personal experiences, backgrounds, and beliefs. There is also great significance in studying the Bible with others. Allow a time for participants to debrief and hear the ways that God speaks to the others in the group. Use the following questions to guide the discussion:

- What did you hear God saying to you through the Scripture?
- How did you see a connection between these words of action and the roles and traits on your chart?
- How have you noticed a connection between your experiences and the words of Scripture in your life in the past?
- How do our culture, history, and theology affect how we read and interpret the Bible?

## Closing (5 minutes)

### 6. Hearing the Message

Conclude the discussion and the session by quoting Gene March's closing sentence from the Participant Handout: "The variety of interpretations displayed among God's people is the evidence of the power of God to address us right where we live."

Describe one such interpretation. To catch the emotion of the Scriptures for his parishioners, Eugene Peterson wrote a biblical version of the Old and New Testaments, using the original languages without looking at other English translations. Peterson's *The Message* is now read widely by contemporary readers. Close the session with the words of Colossians 3:12–17 interpreted with the Holy Spirit through Peterson's experience, culture, and knowledge:

So, chosen by God for this new life of love, dress in the wardrobe God picked out for you: compassion, kindness, humility, quiet strength, discipline. Be even-tempered, content with second-place, quick to forgive an offense. Forgive as quickly and completely as the Master forgave you. And regardless of what else you put on, wear love. It's your basic, all-purpose garment. Never be without it.

Let the peace of Christ keep you in tune with each other, in step with each other. None of this going off and doing your own thing. And cultivate thankfulness. Let the Word of Christ—the Message—have the run of the house. Give it plenty of room in your lives. Instruct and direct one another using good common sense. And sing, sing your hearts out to God! Let every detail in your lives—words, action, whatever—be done in the name of the Master, Jesus, thanking God the Father every step of the way.<sup>1</sup>

## Teaching Alternatives

- For a more interactive approach to discovering how personal experience connects to biblical interpretation, use the same format as described but in a less-introspective manner. Read the Scripture aloud and ask the participants to share what they heard and noticed. As a group, invite the participants to help one another discover the connections between their experiences as recorded on the charts and the words of Scripture. In a close-knit group, this can become an opportunity to affirm the gifts and talents of the members.
- If this session is being led as the conclusion of the Interpreting the Bible series, consider tying together the sessions in this series by opening with the prayer from the first session, included here:

How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD of hosts!  
My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God (Ps. 84:1–2 NRSV).

**We praise you, God!**

How I love your Temple, Lord Almighty! How I want to be there! I long to be in the Lord's Temple. With

my whole being I sing for joy to the living God (Ps. 84:1–2 TEV).

**We praise you, God!**

How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD Almighty!  
My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God (Ps. 84:1–2 NIV).

**We praise you, God!**

How lovely are your dwelling-places, Yahweh Sabaoth. My whole being yearns and pines for Yahweh's courts, My heart and my body cry out for joy to the living God (Ps. 84:1–2 NJB).

**We praise you, God!**

How amiable are thy tabernacles, O LORD of hosts!  
My soul longeth, yea, even fainteth for the courts of the LORD: my heart and my flesh crieth out for the living God (Ps. 84:1–2 KJV).

**We praise you, God!**

## Key Scriptures

Deuteronomy 6:4–9

Isaiah 40:1–8

John 1:1–18

Colossians 3:12–17

## For More Information

Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message* (Colorado Springs, CO; NavPress, 1993). See <http://www.navpress.com>.

Description of personal lectio divina: <http://www.pcusa.org/spiritualformation/practices.htm>.

## About the Writer

*Martha Miller is a certified Christian educator and ordained elder in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). She has served churches in Kentucky, Florida, and North Carolina and previously served on staff for the PC(USA).*

## Endnote

1. Eugene Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2003). Used by permission of NavPress Publishing Group.

# Why Do People Interpret the Bible Differently?

## Who Are You?

