



Biblical Interpretation 101

SESSION 1

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

Goal for the Session

The participants will be introduced to the complexity of reading the Bible given its context and culture and will be given the opportunity to utilize several biblical study tools.

Preparing for the Session

- Begin your preparations with prayer, acknowledging God's presence in your life and your group.
- Print out the appendix in this Leader's Guide to use for the opening litany. Make enough copies for your group. If you want to save paper, let people share.
- Read through the Participant Handout. It may be helpful as you read to highlight phrases or sections that strike you as important or that raise a question in your mind. The participants in the group may have the same questions or want to stress the same points. This will get you thinking ahead of time.
- Provide different versions of the Bible for use during the session. Suggested versions to have available include the Revised Standard Version or New Revised Standard Version, King James Version, *New International Version*, *The New Jerusalem Bible*, and "The Good News Bible in *Today's English Version*."
- Participants will also need some of the basic books used in studying Scripture such as handbooks, Bible dictionaries, encyclopedias, and commentaries. Pastors and church libraries usually have several of these study tools, but you can also acquire them from a public library if necessary. A list of some suggested resources is included in the "For More Information" section.
- Have a flip chart or newsprint available in order to record thoughts and reactions from the group.
- Paper and pencils or pens will be necessary for the group participants as well as copies of the Participant Handout.
- About the Interpreting the Bible Study Pack: The Thoughtful Christian previously released the Expanded Basic Bible Study Pack, which consists of nine studies and a total of thirteen sessions, available individually or as a study pack on the site. The Interpreting the Bible Study Pack is related to the first study pack, and the two may be used together as a series. Some themes overlap, and you may begin with either study pack first, depending on the interest of your group.

Teaching Tip

Many adults have grown up learning, memorizing, and remembering Scripture verses. Some feel comfortable with these foundational words. Be aware that this session may challenge some participants to start over, reading the texts with new eyes and revising early beliefs. Encourage the participants to be open to new concepts.

Opening (10 minutes)

1. Prayer

Use the litany provided at the end of this Leader's Guide as the opening prayer. As the leader, read aloud the words in plain type, asking the group to respond each time with the phrase "We praise you, God." If participants do not have copies, you may choose to nod your head or give another signal when you have finished the section, letting the group know when to respond.

2. Listening with New Ears

Reflecting on the psalm used in the opening prayer, ask the participants to identify phrases or words that stood out to them. It may be helpful to record some of these insights on a flip chart to aid the visual learners in the group. Compare some words. Ask: Is there a difference between *Lord of hosts*, *Lord Almighty*, and *Yahweh Sabaoth*? How can we know which is the closest to the original text? Then tell the class that we are beginning to address the challenges of the session. We have to study to better understand.

Some members may raise objections that throughout the centuries the Bible has transformed the lives of uneducated people who did not study the Bible as we are doing. You should confirm this. In fact, the author reminds participants of this in the last paragraph of the session. However, the people of God have always sought help in interpreting Scripture. Remember the disciples constantly asking Jesus for help in understanding Scripture? We are no different! Our goal in this study is to improve our interpretation skills using all the resources created by faithful people throughout the centuries.

Exploring (20 minutes)

3. The Challenge of an Ancient Text

Invite a few volunteers to pick up one of the translations of the Bible you have brought and read Galatians 5:20. Consider making a grid and comparing different words used for “works of the flesh.”

Ask: why all the different words? Explain that just as Paul used words that made sense in his day, so translators have done throughout the years.

Give a brief introduction to the variety of resource books you have available. Invite individuals or small groups to do some word searches and prepare to return to the group with a word or words that might express the original word’s meaning to people today. If you have time, invite them to rewrite the entire list!

Return to a large-group discussion, and invite participants to share their findings.

Responding (10 minutes)

4. Elements of Interpretation

Word studies like the one we just did are one part of interpretation. Write on the flip chart or newsprint “‘There was no place for them at the inn’ (Luke 2:7).” Ask participants to write down all the various kinds of information that might help in determining the significance of this passage. If participants have not read the handout, suggest they read the section “Understanding a Different Society.” Some things they may write down include cultural factors (given the strong hospitality rules of the time, why would someone be turned away?), historical factors (were hotels common?), and societal factors (how might Mary and Joseph’s racial/ethnic status have influenced the situation?).

5. Discussion

Discuss what participants wrote in exercise 4. Finish the discussion by reminding participants that this exercise was meant to point out some of the many factors involved when we interpret Scripture and introduce some tools that might help.

Closing (5 minutes)

6. Prayer

Holy God, we leave this place with thoughts of praise, remembering the wonderful gifts you have given. The great gift of your Word as it leads and guides us remains forefront in our minds. We are inspired by your Spirit. It is that same Spirit who plays a part in the interpretation, assisting us as we seek to learn more about your Word. For the opportunity to read, to study, and to learn more about those who came before us, we thank you. Go with us, Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

7. Preparing for the Next Session

Distribute the handout for the next session, and ask the group members to read it carefully during the coming week. Encourage the group to pay particular attention to the historical timeline presented in the handout.

Teaching Alternatives

- Because of time restrictions, group members may use only one biblical study tool in their small group.

With a smaller group, there may be an opportunity for each person to become more familiar with the variety of tools. During the large-group-sharing portion of the “Exploring” section, consider having the users of each tool describe how it is formatted and used. If the biblical study tools belong to a particular person, consult that owner about whether the group participants can borrow the books. If the books belong to the church library, take the group on a tour of the library, showing the group members where the reference books are located. It is amazing how many church members are not familiar with the books that the church already owns.

- If these study exercises are popular with the group, encourage the members to voluntarily study the origin of another Scripture passage and present it at the next meeting time.
- Consider using the opening prayer litany used in the “Opening” section for each of the three “Biblical Interpretation 101” sessions.

Key Scripture

Psalms 84

For More Information

Some biblical study tools to consider providing for this session:

Paul J. Achtemeier, ed., *The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996).

Donald E. Gowan, ed., *The Westminster Theological Wordbook of the Bible* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2003).

James L. Mays, *HarperCollins Bible Commentary*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2000).

Bruce M. Metzger and Roland E. Murphy, eds., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991). Study notes can be very helpful for participants.

Sharon H. Ringe and Carol A. Newsom, *Women’s Bible Commentary*, exp. ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1998).

For additional information on the book of Psalms:

Bernhard W. Anderson and Roy Stephen Bishop, *Out of the Depths: The Psalms Speak for Us Today*, 3rd ed. rev. and exp. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2000).

James L. Mays, *Psalms* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1994).

For additional study on biblical interpretation:

Keith R. Crim, “Modern English Versions of the Bible” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 1. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994).

Donald L. Griggs, *The Bible from Scratch: The New Testament for Beginners* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2003).

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About the Writer

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Appendix

Opening Prayer

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 souls 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!