

## **Introduction.**

I am about to convince you on the basis of 3 Bible verses that right here, right now you all need to commit suicide!

**"Then he (Judas) went away and hanged himself"**  
(Matthew 27 v 5); **"Jesus told him "go and do likewise"**  
(Luke 10 v 37); **"What you are about to do, do quickly"**  
(John 13 v 27.)

## **Background.**

So it is quite possible to make the Bible say anything that we want it to say because – **"a text out of context is a pretext!"** Which is why the Apostle Paul's advice to young Timothy was – **"Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who CORRECTLY HANDLES THE WORD OF TRUTH"** (2 Timothy 2 v 15.)

One of the main ways that will enable us to **"correctly handle the Word of truth"** is through correct Biblical interpretation, or if you like technical terms **HERMINUTICS** or **EXEGESIS**. So today we are going to give our attention to mastering a few of the basic principles of Biblical interpretation.

Begin by reading the passage out aloud over and over again, ignoring the man made chapter divisions, while prayerfully asking God to reveal the meaning to you. Meditate and reflect on it – **"try to sink deeply into it, so as to really hear what it is saying"** (D.Bonhoeffer.) This might involve a variety of bible translations and paraphrases, even the original Greek and Hebrew if you can manage it!!

After having received some inspiration, it is then that the perspiration kicks in and the hard work of interpretation begins by seeking to establish the context of the passage, in terms of

what it meant to the original hearers to whom it was first spoken or written. So here is a threefold approach to establishing the context and correctly interpreting a Biblical passage:-

### **A – Observation.**

Examine the words used in the passage – what are the main ones? Are any repeated? Are there any “**connector**” words such as “therefore, because, for and since?”

Examine the structure of the passage – The Bible does not adopt a – “**one size fits all approach!**” in that no two passages are the same.

Examine any images used in the passage – vineyard, shepherd, fishing net, bread etc.

Examine the genre of the passage – What type of literature is it? Is it narrative, poetry, prophesy, wisdom, gospel, epistle or apocalyptic?

### **B – Interpretation.**

The general principle would be to “**allow Scripture to interpret Scripture.**” This involves working in ever expanding circles:-

**A** – What is the immediate context of the passage? Check out the verses that come before, as well as those that follow.

**B** – In what section of the Biblical book/letter is the passage located? Here you broaden and widen the framework to cover the section of the book in which the passage is located – **e.g** – 1 Corinthians 12 – 14 – spiritual gifts used in love / Psalms 22 – 24 – The Saviour; the Shepherd; the Sovereign Lord.

**C** – How does the particular passage relate to the wider message of the book itself? If you were reading a book, you

would not open it at page 50, read a paragraph and from that assume that you could speak with some authority about the meaning of the book. Before being able to do that you would need to have read the whole chapter, if not the whole book itself.

**D** – How does it fit in with the teaching of the whole of the Bible? You would want to make sure that your interpretation is not at odds with the overall message of the Bible, which is not one book, but a 66 book library containing all kinds of different literature.

You could possibly come across an example of so called **“antecedent theology”** or **“first mention principle”** where this is the first Biblical reference to a particular truth or concept. It can then be traced throughout the rest of the Bible, where perhaps additional details are provided, giving a balanced interpretation.

Or it could discover an example of the **“progressive mention principle”** where this particular passage is not completely clear, but when cross referenced with other passages, the truth is supported by a parallel passage and becomes crystal clear.

Or it could be a **“full mention text”** where the truth is treated in its fullest sense giving an informed Biblical perspective without the need to look any further.

Or it could find out that this is the only reference to such truth in the whole of the Bible; that being the case, beware of building a doctrine on it!

Then having thoroughly considered the Bible, start to use other books and commentaries to:-

Establish the historical (date), geographical (country) and cultural setting (Jewish or Gentile) of the passage.

Ask some key questions, with a view to discovering some answers, and to that end here is a little rhyme to remind you of those questions you really ought to be asking:

**"I had 6 faithful friends, they taught me all I knew,  
their names are HOW and WHAT and WHY, WHEN and  
WHERE and WHO."**

### **C – Application.**

This is - **"the final purpose of Bible study"** and seeks to provide an answer to the question – So what?

Having made a correct interpretation based on the original context, the practical significance then needs to be applied to the modern context. The leap must be made from then to now, as the truth is updated and applied to today; to quote the words of Karl Barth – **"Prepare with the Bible in one hand and the daily newspaper in the other."** The Biblical Word needs to be brought to bear on the contemporary world.

**Group work** - Apply these 3 principles to John 2 v 1 – 11.

**Observation** – What is the structure of the passage? What is the image being used in the passage? What is the genre of the passage? What are the key words?

**Interpretation** – What comes before and after? Is the location of any significance? How does it fit in with the teaching of the Gospel and the whole of the Bible? What would you say in the main meaning of the passage?

**Application** – How should the passage be applied to today?