Session 3: From Presumption to Interpretation

* In the Observation phase of Bible study, we discover “what” a passage says. In the Interpretation phase, we uncover “why” the passage says it. When we understand the “why,” we’ve identified the text’s meaning and then we’re ready to get practical.
* We interpret because God made us to interpret. Communication always moves from observation to interpretation. Because of that, why would we ever stop with observation of the Bible only? We will not hear God speak through His Word if we do not take the next step and interpret the text we just observed.
* In the same way that familiarity is the enemy of observation, presumption is the enemy of interpretation. Presumption is the fruit of familiarity. It relies on drawing a conclusion from limited evidence. Why would we settle for limited evidence when the truth is so accessible? Presumption is deadly when it trumps careful investigation. Work to guard yourself against these various kinds of presumption:
  + **Relativism**—believing a text means whatever we want it to mean—can be a form of presumption. We’re not compelled to investigate the evidence, so we’re “tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes” (Ephesians 4:14). We lose our anchor in Christ.
  + **Tradition** can be a form of presumption when it bullies observation, threatens investigation, and demands adherence to a sanctioned message. Now I’m no hater of tradition; it’s both valuable and necessary. But when it drives—and isn’t driven by—interpretation, it rampages and destroys like a toddler in a city. Unexamined tradition trains people to think only what they were taught to think, which may or may not be the truth.
  + **Education** can be a form of presumption when, like tradition, it generates thoughts but not thinkers. Irresponsible education—whether theistic or atheistic—results in students who presume to know the Bible, but who have ceased listening to it. For such learners, Jedi Master may prove instructive: “You must unlearn what you have learned.”
  + **Premature application** can be a form of presumption when we jump to conclusions in the name of relevance. We read and observe the text, but we move straight to application. We want our answers to be quick and practical, but we fail to base our applications on what the text is actually saying.
  + **Authority** can be a form of presumption when we carelessly trust what the experts say about a text. We might learn to regurgitate their conclusions, but we won’t learn to reach them ourselves. Our teaching will lack substantiation, and the next generation will grow disillusioned by what it perceives to be hollow.
  + Tradition, education, application, and authority are all good things. In the right context, presumption is a good thing. But unchecked, it will stifle your ability to interpret Scripture.
* **Three Steps for Interpreting the Bible**
* The OIA method can be diagrammed in the shape of a big X as illustrated by the attached worksheet. While there is an almost infinite number of observations that we can make about the text of Scripture, the number of interpretations is not this way. Though our grasp of interpretations may mature over time, the biblical authors had agendas in their writings and we are not authorized to add to those agendas. Since the Bible is God’s Word to us, good interpretation leads us to think God’s thoughts. There are three steps of interpretation that will lead us to do this.
* **Ask Questions of Your Observations**
* The first step in the interpretive process is to take all of your observations and ask lots of questions about them. In this step you’re trying to be as inquisitive as possible. Get better at asking questions and you’ll grow in your ability to interpret as well.
* Our job is not to innovate the text, but we are instead to uncover what is there. If the observations you made were poor, then your interpretation won’t be any better. (John 21:22-23 illustrates the importance of correct observation).
* The main questions to consider are “What,” “Why,” and “so what.”
  + **“What”** questions clarify or define your observations, as in, “What does this phrase mean?” “Who,” “Where,” “When,” and “How” questions also fit into this category. The questions transition you from observation to interpretation.
  + **“Why”** questions uncover the author’s purpose, as in, “Why did he say that?” These questions could be considered the essence of interpretation.
  + **“So what”** questions draw out the implications, as in, “So what does he want us to do about it?” These transition you from interpretation to application.
* These questions applied to the five fundamental skills of observation provide 15 possible categories of questions. Don’t feel a pressure to fill every box, however. This is simply a tool that is helpful in determining the author’s main point. But it is still true that the more work you sow into asking questions, the more fruit you will reap in your interpretation.
* **Answer the Questions from the Text**
* Once you have formulated your questions, begin to answer them. But there is one critical rule that must be followed when answering questions from the text – you can only answer questions if they are answered, implicitly or explicitly, in the text. Don’t use the minor details to make a text say something that you want it to say. Don’t build a theology off of one unclear verse. Only answer those questions that are assumed or addressed in Scripture, otherwise let it go and allow for differences of interpretation.
  + **Answers assumed –** it may be the case that the answers to a certain text are assumed in the text because the original audience would have understood the allusions made. For example, we need Jeremiah 34:18-20 to understand Genesis 15 where it details splitting an animal in half and passing in between the pieces. Without the commentary of this prophet we would miss out on the richness of Genesis 15.
  + **Answers addressed** – some answers will be given directly from the text itself, either implicitly or explicitly.
  + **Other questions** – some questions will not be able to be answered immediately from a particular text. These should be let go until another text speaks to them or held loosely with the understanding that they are secondary interpretations.
* **Determine the Author’s Main Point**
* Sometimes the main point of a passage is explicit, but most times you will have to work at determining it. Either way, uncovering the main point is the goal of interpretation.
* **How Do We Find the Author’s Main Point?**
  + **Always Ask “Why?”**
  + It is not enough to simply know the answer to the “what” questions. We must also ask the “why” questions. Knowing the facts about a passage is not the same as knowing the main point of the author.
  + **Account for the Context**
  + In addition to the historical context established in the book overview, it is helpful to understand the literary context of the surrounding passages before and after the text being examined.
  + Also, the inter-textual context will provide insight into the text by seeing if it is alluded to in any other portion of Scripture.
  + **Track with the Author’s Flow of Thought**
  + This can be done by breaking down the structure of a passage into paragraphs, sentences, phrases, or even individual words. Ask the question, “How did the author get from the first verse to the last verse,” and “Why did he take that route?”
* **How to See Jesus in Any Bible Passage**
* The goal of studying the Bible is to know Jesus, so how do we see Jesus in every page of Scripture? Every passage should direct us to Jesus in some way. Luke 24:46-47 provides a template for what we should look for as we seek legitimate connections between the text being studied and Jesus. It says, “Thus it was written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and the repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.”
* Every passage of Scripture reveals Jesus by explaining at least one of the following truths about his work:
  + **1. The Messiah suffer (die) and rise from the dead.**
  + **2. We must repent of our sins and be forgiven.**
  + **3. This message – The Messiah’s death and resurrection make forgiveness possible – must be proclaimed to all nations.**
* So rather than looking for Jesus in every detail, we should connect the main point of an Old or New Testament passage to these three truths about Jesus. The message of the whole Bible is a unified message summarized in these three truths from Luke 24:46–47.
* For example…
  + The call of Abraham in Genesis 12:1–9 is about how God chose one man to be the focal point of blessing for the whole world. What’s the connection to Jesus? His message is for every nation (Galatians 3:8–9).
  + When God asked Abraham to sacrifice his only beloved son (Genesis 22), he was showing both Abraham and us how the Messiah had to die and rise from the dead (Hebrews 11:17–19).
  + When innocent Daniel was tossed into the lion’s den and came out unharmed (Daniel 6), he foreshadowed the Messiah’s death and resurrection.
  + When Moses and Solomon wrote laws and proverbs, God was revealing his high standards. He had to expose our inability to perform so we might learn to repent of our sins and be forgiven.
  + All four Gospels magnify and climax on Jesus’ death and resurrection; they present Jesus as much more than a role model. Thus, Jesus’ healing miracles often show Jesus “trading places” with sufferers in order to save them (Matthew 8:14–17); Jesus is not only an example of social justice but also a savior to the ostracized and the unjust.
  + Much of Acts and many epistles elaborate on how Jesus’ message is for all nations. Since Jews and Gentiles were brought together in one body, any person of any gender, race, or class can freely receive Jesus’ forgiveness and unite with his body.
  + Instructional passages—like the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:16–26) or the “love chapter” (1 Corinthians 13)—don’t make us into more righteous, more acceptable, people; they show us what happens to people whose sins are forgiven because they have trusted in Christ and received his Spirit.
* As you interpret, don’t stop until you see Jesus in every passage.