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Grasping God's Word

your guide to understanding and applying the Bible

JOURNEY INTO GOD'S WORD

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Journey into God's Word

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*To those who labor to teach
God's people how to understand
and apply God's Word*

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The Interpretive Journey

1

A wrinkled old man in the mountains of Ethiopia sips coffee and peers through weathered, ancient reading glasses at his worn Amharic Bible to read once again the story of David and Goliath. A middle-aged woman is bouncing along on a bus in Buenos Aires, reading and reflecting on Psalm 1. A young Korean executive, on his way home to Seoul from a business trip to Singapore, flies above the clouds at 35,000 feet, reading and pondering the words of the apostle Paul in Romans 5. And in a dorm room in San Diego, California, a young college student polishes off another Mountain Dew and then looks back down at her laptop computer to finish reading Mark's account of how Jesus miraculously calmed a raging storm on the Sea of Galilee.

People all over the world love reading the Bible—and they have loved it for thousands of years. Why? People read the Bible because it is a fascinating book, filled with gripping stories and challenging exhortations. People read it because it is an important book, dealing with the big issues of life—God, eternal life, death, love, sin, and morals. People read it because they believe that in the Bible God speaks to them through written words. The Bible encourages us, lifts our spirits, comforts us, guides us, chides us, builds us up, gives us hope, and brings us close to the living God.

Some parts of the Bible are easy to understand, but much of it is not. Most Christians, however, desire to understand all of God's Word, not just the easy portions. Many of us want to be able to dig deeper into that Word. We want to see more and to understand more of the biblical text.

We also want to know that we understand the Bible correctly. That is, we want to be confident that we can pull the actual truth out of a text and not just develop an arbitrary, fanciful, or incorrect interpretation. This book is designed for such people.

The process of interpreting and grasping the Bible is similar to embarking on a *journey*. Reading the text thoroughly and carefully lies at the beginning of the journey. From this careful reading we become able to determine what the passage meant in the biblical context—that is, what it meant to the biblical audience.

Often, however, when we try to apply this meaning directly to ourselves, we run into problems. We are separated from the biblical audience by culture and customs, language, situation, and a vast expanse of time. These differences form a barrier—a *river* that separates us from the text and that often prohibits us from grasping the meaning of the text for ourselves.

If that were not enough, the Old Testament widens the river by adding another major interpretive barrier that separates us from the audience. Between the Old Testament biblical audience and Christian readers today lies a change in *covenant*. We as New Testament believers are under the new covenant, and we approach God through the sacrifice of Christ. The Old Testament people, however, were under the old covenant, and for them the law was central. In other words, the theological situation for the two groups is different. There is a covenant barrier between the Old Testament audience and us because we are under different covenants.

Thus, the river between the Old Testament text and us consists not only of culture, language, situation, and time, but also of covenant. We have much more in common with the New Testament audience; yet even in the New Testament, the different culture, language, and specific situations can present a formidable barrier to our understanding of the meaning of the text. The river is often too deep and too wide simply to wade across.

As a result, today's Christian is often uncertain about how to interpret much of the Bible. How should we understand Leviticus 19:19, which prohibits wearing a garment made of two types of material? Does this mean that obedient Christians should wear only 100 percent cotton clothes? In

Judges 6:37 Gideon puts out a fleece in order to confirm what God had told him. Does this mean that *we* should put out fleeces when we seek God's leading?

Passages in the New Testament are not always much clearer. For example, Peter walks on the water in Matthew 14:29. Does this mean that *we* should attempt to walk on water in our obedience to Christ? If not, what does it mean and how can we apply that passage to our lives? Even if we cannot walk on water, how do we cross the river that separates us from the text?

Any attempt to interpret and to apply the Bible involves trying to cross the river. While often unconscious of their interpretive method, many Christians today nonetheless frequently employ an *intuitive* or *feels-right* approach to interpretation. If the text looks as if it could be applied directly, then they attempt to apply it directly. If not, then they take a *spiritualizing* approach to the meaning—an approach that borders on allegorizing the biblical text (which shows little or no sensitivity to the biblical context). Or else they simply shrug their shoulders and move onto another passage, ignoring the meaning of the text altogether.

Such approaches will never land us safely on the other side of the river. Those using the intuitive approach blindly wade out into the river, hoping that the water is not more than knee deep. Sometimes they are fortunate and stumble onto a sandbar, but often they step out into deep water, and they end up washed ashore somewhere downstream. Those who spiritualize, by contrast, try to jump the river in one grand leap, but they also end up washed ashore downstream with their intuitive buddies. Shrugging or ignoring a passage is to remain on the far side of the river and simply to gaze across without even attempting to cross.

Many Christians are admittedly uncomfortable with such approaches, recognizing the somewhat willy-nilly methodology and the extreme subjectivity involved, but they continue to use them because they are the only method they know. How do we move from the world of the biblical audience to the world of today?

This book addresses how to cross over that river into the world of today. We need a valid, legitimate approach to the Bible, one that is not based strictly on intuition and feeling. We need an approach that derives

meaning from within the text, but one that also crosses over to the situation for today's Christian.

We also need a consistent approach, one that can be used on any passage. Such an approach should eliminate the habit of skipping over texts and surfing along through the Bible looking for passages that might apply. A consistent approach should allow us to dig into any passage with a method to determine the meaning of that text for us today. We need an approach that does not leave us stranded on the banks of the interpretive river and one that does not dump us into the river to be washed ashore downstream. We need a way to study the Bible to cross over the river with validity and accuracy. Our goal in this book is to take you on the journey across the river, to transport you from the text and the world of the biblical audience to a valid understanding and application of the text for Christians today.

Basics of the Journey

Keep in mind that our goal is to grasp the meaning of the text God has intended. We do not create meaning out of a text; rather, we seek to find the meaning that is already there. However, we recognize that we cannot apply the meaning for the ancient audience directly to us today because of the river that separates us (culture, time, situation, covenant, etc.). Following the steps of the Interpretive Journey provides us with a procedure that allows us to take the meaning for the ancient audience and to cross over the river to determine a legitimate meaning for us today.

This journey works on the premise that the Bible is a record of God's communication of himself and his will to us. We revere the Bible and treat it as holy because it is the Word of God and because God reveals himself to us through this Word. Many texts in the Bible are specific, concrete, revelatory expressions of broader, universal realities or theological principles. While the specifics of a particular passage may only apply to the particular situation of the biblical audience, the theological principles revealed in that text are applicable to all of God's people at all times. The theological principle, therefore, has meaning and application both to the ancient biblical audience and to Christians today.

Because the theological principle has meaning and application to both audiences, it functions as a bridge spanning the river of differences. Rather than blindly wading out into the river, foolishly attempting to jump across the river in one short hop, or wishfully gazing at the other shore without ever crossing, we can safely cross over the river on the bridge that the theological principle provides. Constructing this *principilizing bridge* will be one of the critical steps in our Interpretive Journey.

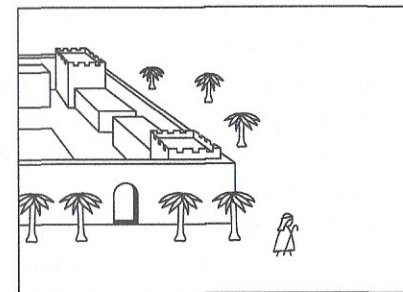
Thus, our journey starts with a careful reading of the text. Our final destination is to grasp the meaning of the text so that it changes our lives. It is an exciting trip, but one that requires hard work. There are no easy shortcuts.

The basic Interpretive Journey involves four steps:

Step 1: Grasping the Text in Their Town.

What did the text mean to the biblical audience?

The first part of Step 1 is to read the text carefully and observe the details. In Step 1, try to see as much as possible in the text. Look, look, and look again, observing all that you can. Scrutinize the grammar and analyze all significant words. Likewise, study the historical and literary contexts. How does your passage relate to the one that precedes it and the one that follows?



After completing all of this study, synthesize the meaning of the passage for the biblical audience into one or two sentences. That is, write out what the passage meant for the biblical audience. Use past-tense verbs and refer to the biblical audience. For example:

God commanded the Israelites in Joshua 1 to ...

Jesus encouraged his disciples by ...

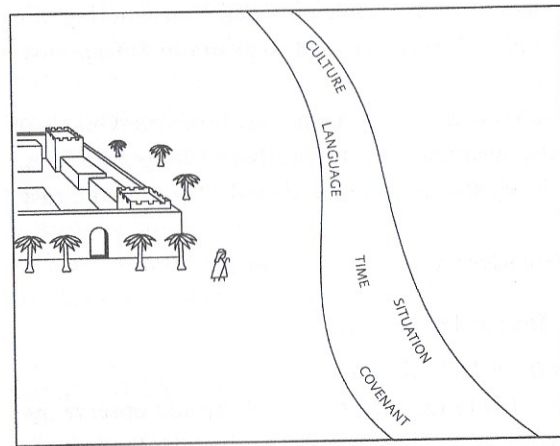
Paul exhorted the Ephesians to ...

Be specific. Do not generalize or try to develop theological principles yet.

Step 2: Measuring the Width of the River to Cross.

What are the differences between the biblical audience and us?

As mentioned above, the Christian today is separated from the biblical audience by differences in culture, language, situation, time, and often covenant.



These differences form a river that hinders us from moving straight from meaning in their context to meaning in ours. The width of the river, however, varies from passage to passage. Sometimes it is extremely wide,

requiring a long, substantial bridge for crossing. Other times, however, it is a narrow creek that we can easily hop over. It is obviously important to know just how wide the river is before we start trying to construct a principlizing bridge across it.

In Step 2 you will take a good hard look at the river and determine just how wide it is for the passage you are studying. In this step you look for significant *differences* between our situation today and the situation of the biblical audience. If you are studying an Old Testament passage, also be sure to identify those significant theological differences that came as a result of the life and work of Jesus Christ.

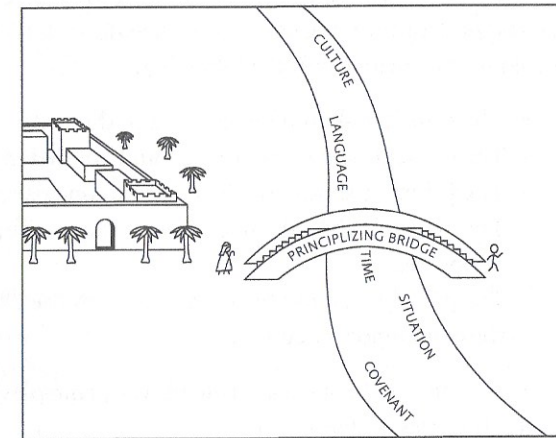
In addition, whether in the Old Testament or in the New Testament, try to identify any unique aspects of the *situation* of your passage. For example, in Joshua 1:1–9, the people of Israel are preparing to enter the Promised Land. Moses has just died and Joshua has been appointed to take his place. In this passage God speaks to Joshua to encourage him to be strong and faithful in the upcoming conquest of the land. What are the differences? We are not entering or conquering the Promised Land.

We are not the new leaders of the nation of Israel. We are not under the old covenant.

Step 3: Crossing the Principlizing Bridge.

What is the theological principle in this text?

This is perhaps the most challenging step. In it you are looking for the theological principle or principles that are reflected in the meaning of the text you identified in Step 1. Remember that this theological principle is part of the *meaning*. Your task is not to create the meaning but to discover the meaning intended by the author. As God gives specific expressions to specific biblical



audiences, he is also giving universal theological teachings for all of his people through these same texts.

To determine the theological principle, first recall the differences you identified in Step 2. Next, try to identify any *similarities* between the situation of the biblical audience and our situation. For example, consider Joshua 1:1–9 again. Recall, of course, the differences that we identified in Step 2. But then note the similarities between the biblical situation and our own: We are also the people of God, in covenant relationship (new covenant); while we are not the leaders of Israel, nonetheless many of us are in leadership positions in the church; we are not invading the Promised Land, but we are seeking to obey the will of God and to accomplish what he has commanded us to do.

After reviewing the differences and identifying the similarities, return to the meaning for the biblical audience that you described in Step 1 and

Journey into God's Word

try to identify a broader theological principle reflected in the text, but also one that relates to the similarities between us and the biblical audience. We will use this theological principle as the *principlizing bridge* by which we can cross over the river of barriers.

In addition, during this step you must enter into the *parts-whole spiral*. That is, you reflect back and forth between the text and the teachings of the rest of Scripture. The theological principle that you derive should not only be present in the passage, but it must also be congruent with the rest of Scripture. We can summarize the criteria for formulating the theological principle with the following:

- The principle should be reflected in the text.
- The principle should be timeless and not tied to a specific situation.
- The principle should not be bound to one particular culture.
- The principle should correspond to the teaching of the rest of Scripture.
- The principle should be relevant to both the biblical audience and the contemporary audience.

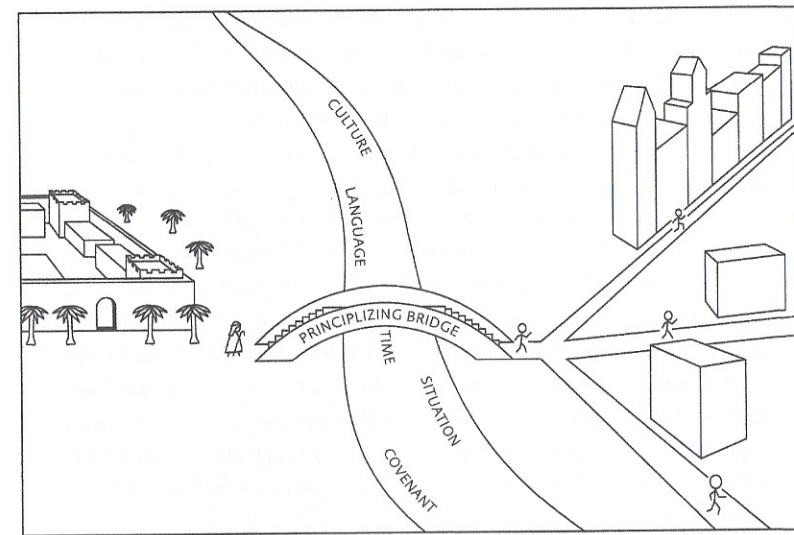
Write out the theological principle (or principles) in one or two sentences. Use present-tense verbs.

Step 4: Grasping the Text in Our Town.

How should individual Christians today apply the theological principle in their lives?

In Step 4 we apply the theological principle to the specific situation of individual Christians in the church today. We cannot leave the meaning of the text stranded in an abstract theological principle. We must now grapple with how we should respond to that principle in our town. How does it apply in real-life situations today?

While for each passage there will usually only be a few (and often only one) theological principles relevant for all Christians today, there will be numerous possibilities for application. This is because Christians today find themselves in many different specific situations. Each of us will grasp and apply the same theological principle in slightly different ways, depending on our current life situation and where we are in our



relationship with God. In our illustration, we have tried to show the different applications possible by showing different individuals traveling on different streets. (The application step will be discussed in much more detail in chapter 8.)

So, the Interpretive Journey as a whole looks like this:

- Step 1: Grasp the text in their town.
- Step 2: Measure the width of the river to cross.
- Step 3: Cross the principlizing bridge.
- Step 4: Grasp the text in our town.

An Example — Joshua 1:1–9

We have mentioned Joshua 1:1–9 several times already. Let's make the formal trip from this Old Testament passage to life today in order to illustrate how the Interpretive Journey works.

The passage is as follows:

¹After the death of Moses the servant of the LORD, the LORD said to Joshua son of Nun, Moses' aide: ²"Moses my servant is dead. Now then, you and all these people, get ready to cross the Jordan River into

the land I am about to give to them—to the Israelites. ³I will give you every place where you set your foot, as I promised Moses. ⁴Your territory will extend from the desert and to Lebanon and from the great river, the Euphrates—all the Hittite country—to the Great Sea on the west. ⁵No one will be able to stand up against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you.

⁶“Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to their forefathers to give them. ⁷Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. ⁸Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful. ⁹Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.”

Step 1: What did the text mean to the biblical audience?

The Lord commanded Joshua, the new leader of Israel, to draw strength and courage from God's empowering presence, to be obedient to the law of Moses, and to meditate on the law so that he would be successful in the conquest of the Promised Land.

Step 2: What are the differences between the biblical audience and us?

We are not leaders of the nation Israel (although some of us may be leaders in the church). We are not embarking on the conquest of Canaan, the Promised Land. We are not under the old covenant of law.

Step 3: What is the theological principle in this text?

To be effective in serving God and successful in the task to which he has called us, we must draw strength and courage from his presence. We must also be obedient to God's Word, meditating on it constantly.

Step 4: How should individual Christians today apply the theological principle in their lives?

There are numerous possible applications. Here are a few suggested ones:

- Spend more time meditating on God's Word by listening to Christian music as you ride in your car.

- If God calls you to a new, scary ministry, such as teaching fourth-grade Sunday school, then be strengthened and encouraged by his empowering presence. Be obedient, keeping a focus on the Scriptures.
- If you are in a church leadership position, realize that successful Christian leadership requires strength and courage that flows from the presence of God.

Journey into God's Word

The Interpretive Journey is actually a blueprint for this book. In chapters 2 and 3 we learn how to observe and read carefully. We start with smaller, simpler units of text and then move on to more complex and longer units of text. In chapters 4, 5, and 6 we spend time discussing contexts, both the context of the contemporary reader as well as the cultural-historical and literary contexts of the ancient text. In chapter 7 we will learn more about Bible translations. All of these chapters give us skills necessary to move through Steps 1 and 2 of the Journey. Chapter 8 talks about meaning and application, both important topics for navigating Steps 3 and 4 of the Journey.

Next we move into the actual practice of interpreting and applying the New Testament. We teach you how to journey through different types of New Testament literature. Chapters 9–12 cover, respectively, New Testament letters, the Gospels, Acts, and the book of Revelation. These chapters pull together everything you learned earlier and show you how to apply your new skills to the New Testament.

Finally, we look at some of the specific challenges and opportunities of interpreting and applying passages from the different Old Testament genres. Chapters 13–15 sharpen your tools for understanding and applying passages from a range of Old Testament literature: Law, Prophets, and Psalms.

Are you ready to move forward into the exciting realm of interpretation and application? There are lots of interesting biblical passages ahead of you. Work hard! The rewards are great.

Discussion Questions

1. What is wrong with the "intuitive" method of interpretation?
2. What are the four steps of the Interpretive Journey?
3. What are the differences that determine the width of the river to cross?
4. What are the guidelines for developing theological principles?