

He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation

LESSON
TWO

PREPARATION FOR
INTERPRETATION
DISCUSSION FORUM



THIRD MILLENNIUM

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He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation

Lesson Two: Preparation for Interpretation

Discussion Forum

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Question 1:

In what ways did the writers of Scripture use their own gifts, abilities, and writing styles as they composed the Scriptures?

We affirm wholeheartedly that the Bible was authored by God himself. In this way, it's God's own message to humanity. At the same time, we know that the Bible also had its human authors. In what ways did the writers of Scripture use their own gifts, abilities, and writing styles as they composed the Scriptures?

Dr. Greg Perry

We believe that God, in the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, used the gifts and abilities of each of the human authors of Scripture. He didn't take them over and sort of possess them, but he came alongside and carried them along using the ways in which God had sovereignly prepared them for a particular role. And we see that in the life of Moses. Luke tells us in Acts how he was raised in Pharaoh's court and how he was educated in all of the literature of the ancient Near East. And so, it really shouldn't surprise us that Moses is fully aware of the literary form of covenant, of these treaties between nations. And he chooses that to really utilize, to communicate in ways that the people of God could understand about how God was making promises to them. Or in the life of David, someone who was a musician, who uses the different aspects of Hebrew poetry to really cultivate the worship of the people of God. And so, we should understand how parallelism works, because David is taking those aspects of Hebrew poetry and touching the heart of the people of God to bring them into the worship of God. Or in terms of Paul, trained at the feet of Gamaliel, trained in different ways of using text. And so, it shouldn't surprise us in his use of the Old Testament, then, that he understands different forms of Midrash, of how to link different words and themes together like we see in the first part of 1 Corinthians when

he's linking text about wisdom. Or how he talks about fulfillment language and what that means with regard to *peshet*, that the final age has come, that the time has come for the age of fulfillment. So these different aspects of Midrash make sense as we understand Paul's training with Gamaliel in the use of text. So, the Holy Spirit uses the different backgrounds, the educational backgrounds, even the personal relationships that human authors have and how they choose different genre forms, and even the words they choose to communicate God's word to God's people.

Dr. Daniel B. Wallace

These authors used their own personalities fully in the writing of Scripture. They used their own skills in writing, and those skills included making what we might call "grammatical mistakes." John spells the verb "open" in Greek three different ways in the space of eight verses — a very creative speller. They didn't have any dictionaries back then that said, "Here's how you have to spell these words." But that's what he does in the space of eight verses, three different ways. And you don't get Luke to do those kinds of things. Paul doesn't do that kind of thing. The author of Hebrews writes in a remarkably elegant style with some complex sentences. The author is involved in the learning that God has taken him through for years, and you don't have these authors writing down what God is dictating, except on very few occasions like when Moses wrote down the Ten Commandments. But they're using their personalities, their gifts, their talents, their backgrounds, their language skills, their research skills. When they write the Gospels, they're not sitting down in a room saying, "Okay, Spirit of God, tell me what Jesus did and I'll just copy down what you tell me." That's not at all what happened.

Dr. David T. Lamb

I think as we look at a biblical text, it's important to think how might the biblical authors — the individuals who were behind the text — how might their own individual characteristics, personalities, temperaments, how might have those things shaped how they wrote the text, how they wrote Scripture? ... When it comes to New Testament books, I think we can do some comparisons amongst the Gospel authors. Luke was a physician, and he was perhaps a little bit more academic. He wrote a more orderly account addressed to Theophilus, as we know, but Luke composed things in a different way than Mark. Mark, again, may have been shaped largely by Peter. Peter was more of a blue-collar guy, concerned about action, miracles, everything happened quickly. A lot of "immediately" shows up in the Gospel of Mark. So it's very different from Luke's gospel. Matthew seems to have been... he came from a Jewish background, also perhaps called Levi, his other name. Matthew starts out with the Old Testament and is always jumping back to, "How does Jesus fulfill the Old Testament? How do these things go back to the Old Testament?" Even in the Sermon on the Mount, when Matthew is quoting Jesus, he is concerned to show how Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament. He completed it. He fulfilled it. He is not in contrast to it. John has a very different approach. So John's temperament, we don't know a lot about it, but he seems to be more theological. So in each of these cases, David, Solomon, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, I think we see various aspects about their temperament, their personality that shapes how they write. And I think it's

wonderful to see those, because some of us are going to relate... Some of us may resonate more deeply with Solomon. Others of us will relate more deeply with David or Luke. Personally, I love Mark. I'm a practical person; I like action; I like excitement. I love Mark's gospel. My wife is a little bit more philosophical, theological, intuitive, and she loves John. So I think it's wonderful to see the different personalities of the various authors of Scripture affect how they write.

Dr. David R. Bauer

Well, one of the first things that we notice as we read the Scriptures is that there is a significant difference in writing styles, in vocabulary, in tone among the various biblical writers. So any notion of the Scriptures that moves in the direction of something like a dictation theory seems to run counter to the evidence that we have manifestly in the text itself. Matter of fact, there's even a variety in terms of quality of writing and rhetoric that we have within the Bible. So it's very clear that any understanding of the inspiration of Scripture must, if it's true to the nature of Scripture itself, take that profoundly human aspect into account.

Question 2:

In what ways are unbelievers unable to understand the Scriptures fully?

The Bible is a book that makes significant claims about itself. This means that those who read it must either accept those claims or deny them. But in order to accept these claims, we must first understand them, and sometimes that can be challenging. In what ways are unbelievers unable to understand the Scriptures fully?

Dr. Robert G. Lister

It's an interesting concept to ponder how unbelievers are able to understand the Scriptures in some sense and not in other senses. We recognize on the one hand that unbelievers can regurgitate the message of Scripture. They can repeat back to you the basic propositions of the gospel, and yet they see those in a different way than believers do. 1 Corinthians 2 talks about the natural person being unable to understand the things of the Spirit. And 2 Corinthians 4, I think, is helpful in elaborating on that in indicating that the god of this world has it as a task of his to blind the minds of unbelievers so that they might not see the glory of the gospel of Jesus Christ. And so, the very fact that we're talking about the unbeliever's inability to understand something about Scripture assumes that they can comprehend something of the message of Scripture to begin with. That is, when they respond in 1 Corinthians 1, for example, that the revelation of Christ on the cross is foolishness, they have to have understood something about it first to judge that as foolish. So what is it that they are not understanding? It seems to me that what they are not understanding primarily is the beauty of the truth of Scripture, the glory of the truth of Scripture. They can understand the message "Christ died for sinners," and they look at that as foolishness because they don't see it as beautiful. They look at it as foolish because they don't see it as glorious. They despise what they conceptually understand because

their heart is not prepared to receive that truth. There's a moral antipathy to the truths of Scripture that is based, in part, on the fact that there is a conceptual ability to understand some of the things that Scripture says. So it seems to me that the piece that unbelievers are primarily missing is not necessarily a conceptual capacity to understand the words of John 3:16, or something along those lines, but a loathing of that because they have a different direction of their lives. They have a different worship orientation that loathes the place of God on the throne and would rather see something else there in its place, or his place.

Question 3:

What do theologians mean when they say that the Holy Spirit grants people "illumination" to help them understand Scripture?

The inspiration of Scripture is one of the more frequently discussed topics in theology. The doctrine of inspiration deals with the initial writing of the text. But no less important is the doctrine of illumination, which deals with the subsequent reading of the text. What do theologians mean when they say that the Holy Spirit grants people "illumination" to help them understand Scripture?

Dr. Dan Doriani

The Holy Spirit gives us illumination because by ourselves we simply wouldn't understand what God is saying because we wouldn't want to. The Bible says in one place it's something like a veil over our eyes. We don't want to give up lordship of our own life. We don't want to yield to another master in ourselves unless, unless the Spirit moves us to be open to the idea that we aren't our own saviors and kings. That's the most basic. And then, for a believer, you know, we often read the Bible, and for a little while we say, "I simply don't know what that means," or "I know what it means, but I don't know how to apply it." Now this is the Holy Spirit working alongside us if we're believers. Sometimes you simply have to read a passage two or three or four times. And sometimes you have to read it the third or fourth time and then go away and think about it. And as we do our work, the Holy Spirit will suddenly... "Oh!" — give us an "Ah, now..." because the Spirit opens us to its meaning. We grasp what it means and we grasp the implications for how I'm living today.

Dr. Glen G. Scorgie

Among the many ministries of the Holy Spirit related to Scripture is a very special ministry that we call "illumination." The Holy Spirit has multiple roles in relationship to Scripture. Among them, of course, and very importantly, is the inspiration of the authors and the text. But then once the text has been received by the church as a gift, the Holy Spirit does not stop his engagement and involvement with the Scriptures but then participates in this ministry of illumination. Illumination is about something becoming luminous or lighted-up. And the idea is that without illumination, perhaps there's insufficient light for the reader to truly grasp the meaning and application of the Scripture's message to their own hearts. Again, I think it was Calvin — I know it

was Calvin — who says that illumination is like a light that is shone over your shoulder onto the page of a book and then reflects back into your eyes so that you can see... what is on, the otherwise darkened page. So, this light shining from your shoulder forward to the Scriptures and back into your eyes is not a bad image of this ministry of illumination. There are a number of texts in Scripture that attest to this vital role of the Holy Spirit. And I just mention that one that I learned as a little boy in the old King James Version from Psalm 119 — the longest in the Bible — "Open Thou mine eyes, that I might behold wondrous truths out of your word." That's the spirit of every Christian who goes to the Word of God. You see, to grasp the meaning of Scripture, we need the Spirit all along the way. And the ministry of illumination is absolutely essential and means that we come on our knees, not with a sense of arrogance that we can mine this thing, we can troll for truth, we can in a sense claw everything we need from the Bible on our own in a self-sufficient, even arrogant spirit. Now, I know one of the questions that often comes up is, "Are you saying that an unbeliever with a Ph.D. in Old Testament or New Testament studies can't understand the Bible because they have not been blessed with the illuminating ministry of the Holy Spirit?" Well, of course they can understand many things that are accessible to anyone who understands the languages, understands the historical context, perhaps exercises the historical-grammatical method with some competency. Of course they can understand the intent of Scripture at some level. But when it comes to the connections between that message and the condition of their own hearts and lives, and the implications for action and response, at that point, the ministry of the Holy Spirit in illuminating the word becomes absolutely indispensable. And we also find that the darkened understanding can be brilliant in its intellectual comprehension of the message of Scripture and at the same time be basically in denial, willfully refusing to acknowledge what this calls for in real life. The ministry of illumination breaks down that barrier of denial and exposes the truth and its implications for the reader in a way that is a God-work.

Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

The Holy Spirit inspires Scripture, but then, thankfully, he illumines the believer in his enlightening our understanding of Scripture. So it doesn't mean an unbeliever who doesn't have the illumination of the Spirit isn't able to understand the historical background, the intent of the author, but there is an understanding at a much deeper level that brings a changed life and obedience that the Spirit brings from within.

Dr. Bruce Baugus

Divine illumination is a theme that you find running through Christian theology. Augustine talked about illumination a lot. Reformed theologians continued to affirm the doctrine of divine illumination. In fact, Westminster talks about the necessity of divine illumination for the saving understanding of Scripture. So it's important that we pay attention to this. One of the things that I find that is a common misunderstanding when it comes to divine illumination is that when we talk about divine illumination, we're not talking about illumination of the text. We affirm the perspicuity or the clarity of Scripture, that Scripture... not all things in Scripture are equally clear, but those things that are most necessary to know and to understand for

salvation are most clearly taught. And all things that are necessary to believe are clearly taught in one place or another in Scripture. However, we also believe that we're sinful; we're fallen. As sinners we have an invested interest in defending ourselves against the Word of God, against the authority of God, and that sin blinds us to the truth. This is why we need divine illumination, not because of any deficiency in Scripture itself. It's we who need to be illuminated. It's our minds that need to be illuminated, not the text of Scripture. And the illumination helps us to understand what it is that God is saying to us. It helps us to understand the gospel and how the gospel presses home upon our own life, how it comes to bear upon us and what we must do to be saved.

Question 4:

Why can't we just rely on the Holy Spirit to tell us what the Scriptures mean?

One of the more common notions in biblical interpretation centers on the role of the Holy Spirit. This idea simply states that we're dependent on the Holy Spirit's guidance when we read the Bible. But, if this is the case, why is it important for us to study the Scriptures diligently? Why can't we just rely on the Holy Spirit to tell us what the Scriptures mean?

Dr. Craig S. Keener

There are some people who say, "Well, let's just listen to the Holy Spirit; the Holy Spirit is our teacher." And I don't want anybody to misinterpret me. I believe in all the gifts of the Spirit. I practice some of the gifts of the Spirit. I believe that the Holy Spirit leads us as we pray and in our daily life. I believe in all of that. At the same time, one of the spiritual gifts is teaching. So it's not just that the Spirit teaches us only directly. And also, it's very important, Proverbs says to seek wisdom diligently, to seek knowledge diligently. And sometimes we take shortcuts. It's like we have instant mashed potatoes, or instant this or instant that. We take shortcuts, and we take shortcuts that God doesn't really honor. That is, the way God communicated to us through the text, he inspired these prophets and apostles and others to speak his message, and if we really want to make sure that we're hearing the Spirit, we want to make sure that what we're hearing is in conjunction with what God has already spoken ... If I can just give an illustration of this: When I was a fairly young Christian, I had a friend who was having visions and... she was hearing all sorts of things from God. And that was wonderful, but one day she told me that she had had a new revelation, that there were not just three members in the Trinity, there were four, that we would all become God. And I said, "That's not in the Bible." She said, "That's understandable. This was only revealed last week." I said, "But it contradicts the Bible." And so we went back and forth and back and forth. Ultimately, she was able to be persuaded, but initially her response was, "Well, you know, why should I listen to them? You know, God spoke to them, God speaks to me." But if God is really

speaking to us, what God speaks to us will be consistent with what God has already spoken.

Dr. Philip Ryken

One of my favorite Bible teachers from Scripture is Ezra the priest. And the Scripture says that Ezra had set his heart to study the Word of God and to do it and then to teach its statutes in Israel. And Ezra is a great example of a very hardworking man who labored to understand the Word of God, and then, because of the work that he had done in preparation, was able to put the Word of God into practice in his own life, and then to teach it to an entire nation. And I believe if you look at the life and ministry of Ezra, you see that the Holy Spirit was involved in every aspect of that. The Holy Spirit was with Ezra when he was studying and working hard privately to understand God's Word. The Holy Spirit was enabling him to put that Word into practice, and then the Holy Spirit blessed his teaching of the Word of God. We should not think that the Holy Spirit is only active when we are teaching God's Word. The Holy Spirit loves to work in and through a hardworking, diligent student of the Word of God, and that's what is really blessed as a fruitful ministry, a ministry that invites the Holy Spirit into the work of preparation and also the work of teaching.

Dr. Dennis E. Johnson

Since we know that the Scriptures are breathed out by the Holy Spirit, we might be tempted to think that we don't need to study it very much. If we just keep praying long enough, the Holy Spirit will whisper into our ears or into our minds exactly what every text means. As a matter of fact, though, we need to respect the fact that the Holy Spirit is pleased to use means to reveal what the Scripture means. He uses the means of our study of the Word, because we respect the fact that God gave his Scriptures at a particular time and place in history. He spoke Scriptures over a period of many hundreds of years to ancient Israel. And he spoke into their experience, into their history, in ways that they could understand. He spoke the New Testament in a much briefer period of time, after the coming of Christ, all within the generation of the apostles, but again, to them in their particular time and place. And there are many things that are so distinctive to them, so vivid to them in their time and place that are a little foreign to us now. And so we need to do the work, recognizing that as God gave his Word, we need to do the work of trying to put ourselves as much as we can in their frame of reference to grasp what the text said to them then for the sake of then understanding how it speaks to us today. It's a matter of respecting the way God has given his Word interwoven with his plan of redemption and his outworking of that plan in history, leading to the climax of redemption with the coming and the work of Christ, and therefore the completion of the Scriptures in that first century so that now we want to get at what the Spirit said to them. And we do that through the means that God has provided for us.

Dr. Matt Friedeman

I think we ought to study the Scriptures diligently, and I think we ought to rely upon the Holy Spirit to help us understand what it means. I think these things go together. Some people want to make it an either/or — "I walk by the Spirit" — and people

want to say, "I study the Scriptures, don't really need the Spirit so much." They do need to go together. And when we put them together, we have a powerful resource to live the kind of holy life that he wants us to live.

Question 5:

What types of training and education are most beneficial to us when we interpret the Bible?

We know that the Holy Spirit plays an active part when believers come to study a passage from the Bible. But he doesn't do so apart from the readers' experiences, which include their formal academic training. So, what types of training and education are most beneficial to us when we interpret the Bible?

Dr. Jonathan T. Pennington

When we sit down to study the Bible, either for personal devotion or maybe to lead a Bible study or preach a sermon, there are a whole host of things that can help us do that well. Many people in the world have had the opportunity to have a formal education, but that's not required to be a good student of the Bible. The most important thing you could do is learn to be an active, observant reader. Just to read the text over and over again and with a posture of heart, of receptivity to God, asking the Holy Spirit to in fact illumine us, to help us understand. In terms of a specific set of skills that we can develop? Well, knowledge of how languages work, grammar, and if possible the Hebrew and Greek originals. A knowledge of historical background of the information of the text can be helpful. Knowledge of literature and how it works, how authors often structure ideas and words and paragraphs together, that can all be very helpful in our study of Scripture. But I would suggest in addition to those things, one of the most important skills to have, or tools in interpreting the Bible, is a life of service including even a life of suffering for the sake of Christ. It is when we are in active service to God and his people, in obedience to him, that when we go to the Scriptures we find we understand what God is saying the most. So in addition to those skill sets, I'd like to encourage us to remember that our posture of heart and our willingness as manifested in our lives are some of the most important skills that we can have as we read Scripture.

Dr. Miles Van Pelt

When it comes to reading the Bible in its original context, that task requires a number of fundamental skills. And the better you get at these skills, the better you'll be able to interpret the Bible faithfully and, therefore, to apply it more rigorously and truthfully to the people you preach and teach to. And there are lots of different skills required. And I probably can't comment on all of them, so I'll just talk about some of the really fundamental skills. And one would be, some knowledge of the biblical languages: Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. Because the Bible has come to us from an ancient world in ancient languages, the best way to have first and primary access to those manuscripts and documents are through the languages. And so, one of the skills

necessary would be studying at least some level, having some familiarity with the Hebrew language and the Aramaic language. Those are the two languages the Old Testament was written in. But then also Greek because that's the language of the New Testament. And so you want to have some skills, some facility with all three of those languages. There are other skills necessary. For example, understanding historical backgrounds and historical contexts. So learning something about the culture that the Bible grew up in — to know a little bit about Egypt, and Babylon, and Assyria, and Edom, and Moab — and as they relate to Israel or to Rome, and how that affected the New Testament history and politics and where Jesus grew up and how he lived. Things like that. So, biblical languages, biblical backgrounds. But you also need skills in literary analysis. So you have to be sensitive to the type of literature that you're reading. From historical narrative, but also Old Testament law, or apocalyptic literature, or epistles, or gospels... or praise, wisdom and lament in the poetry, all of these different types of literature require slightly different skills when interpreting. So some languages, some historical background, some literary sensitivity. All of these things take time, to develop these skills. Many of these skills can be gotten on your own through textbooks that are written or produced, but that's often very hard to do ... It's important that pastors and teachers have some type of training, that they begin to swim in a stream where others have gone before them. And they can take up that mantle and learn in that tradition and continue in those skills. And so, studying with another pastor is another way to get those skills. Or studying online, or studying at a seminary, or at a college, something like that. Those are the ways you can get them. But the skills that you need, I would say at the fundamental level, would be: the biblical languages, historical backgrounds, and then literary studies as well. So, a liberal arts education for the Bible.

Question 6:

How do our past experiences help or hinder the way we apply Scripture to our personal lives?

It's important to realize that we don't lay aside our past experiences when we interpret the Bible. Everything an individual goes through affects how he or she relates to the teachings in Scripture. And this has a real impact on application. So, how do our past experiences help or hinder the way we apply Scripture to our personal lives?

Dr. Dan Doriani

First of all, our past experiences influence our interpretation, both for good or for ill. We may, for example, have heard a beloved teacher say something. And since we believe that's true, we see a Bible verse — because we love our teacher and then we see a Bible verse — and we might read that thing that we've been taught into that Bible verse. And it's not very helpful. Sometimes, also, our past makes us say things like, "I will never do this" or "I will never say that." Well, in fact, you're just reacting in some way in which somebody mistreated you, and you may need to do that thing

that you said you would never do. For example, if someone was spanked or even beaten by their parents, they may say, "Well, I'll never lay a hand on my child." Well, be careful about that. I mean, you know, there is a place — gentle, mild — for corporal punishment. And sometimes you may need to lay a hand on your child to pull them away from something that can hurt them. So don't let a vow — "I'll never do 'such and such'" — keep you from following God's Word wherever it leads. A positive way, of course — experiences can sensitize us to things. So for example, if you're young and your life has been beautiful and you grew up in a wonderful home and you have good friends, and the people you worked for were kind, you may have a very limited ability to grasp what the Bible has to say about suffering and lamentation and trouble in this world. And then maybe as years go by, you start to pick up experiences and then you come to understand why there are so many psalms of lamentation, why the Bible does say so much about persecution. When you're young, you may never be persecuted. When you're older, you may boldly step out in faith, and then those verses about paying a price for following Christ are very much alive. ... And so if we have suffered hardship, then we're suddenly sensitized to what the Bible has to say about hardship or persecution. In this way our minds are opened through our experiences.

Dr. Stephen J. Bramer

I think our past experiences of seeing the Word of God applied or misapplied affect us greatly. When it's been applied in a legitimate way, we are open to seeing that application in our own lives, when we've seen it in other people's lives and seen the wonderful results. I think sometimes we've seen Scripture misapplied, perhaps taken out of context, perhaps applied in a very legalistic way, and this affects us. And if we're not careful, we can actually kind of walk away from the Scripture, or any application of it, lest we have those bad experiences come back to us. So I think that our past experiences can help and can hinder us in the application of Scripture. And we need to be mature enough to really begin to question ourselves and say, why am I having difficulty applying this Scripture or accepting a certain application? Is it really because it's demanding something of me that I don't want to give? Or is it because it has been misapplied? And we would recognize that all of us in our churches and in our Christian experience have had both good and bad experiences, and we want to learn from both of them.

Question 7:

Do our sins hinder our ability to interpret the Bible?

We know that our ability to understand a text is influenced by a number of factors. These include our education, theological beliefs, personal experiences, prior interpretation of Scripture and others. But we're also influenced by the sin in our lives. Do our sins hinder our ability to interpret the Bible?

Dr. Simon Vibert

The Bible itself argues that our sinfulness does hinder our ability to understand God's message, and therefore, we do need God's help in order to apprehend what he's saying to us. A generation of Bible theologians made a distinction between the utter depravity of the human being and total depravity. By total depravity they meant that every part of the human being is affected by sin, which includes our thinking and our understanding. But that doesn't mean we're as sinful as we could possibly ever be. And so, consequently, we do believe that sin has affected our ability to understand God's Word, and that reading the Bible is also a deeply spiritual task in which we ask God to help us understand what we're doing and to grasp God's truth, as well as wanting to welcome it in our hearts too.

Dr. Vern S. Poythress

Our sins definitely hinder our ability to interpret the Bible. One way in which that happens is simply laziness. Laziness is a sin with respect to studying the Bible. We don't read it or we don't apply ourselves to the reading of it. So that's one area where sin has an effect. A second area is people can read the Bible and go away and not act on it; they don't apply to their lives. That's the problem that James addresses in chapter 1 of the book of James. Still another area is that people come to the Bible already with the baggage of ideas and distorted conceptions from a life perhaps before they became a believer. One of the most devastating effects of sin, I believe, is simply we impose our own ideas on the Bible. That's rebellious. It's in effect saying, "I want the Bible to say what I want it to say rather than what God says." And that attitude, I think, can creep in subtly even among Christian believers. We've fundamentally been healed from sin by the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, and yet there are remnants left. So we must beware of that kind of attitude. We must listen to the Bible submissively and saying, "Lord, you teach me, you tell me what you're saying here, and I'm not going to impose my own ideas. "

Dr. Gary Cockerill

It's a very interesting and important question whether and, well really, how our sins hinder our ability to interpret Scripture, because they certainly do. First of all, we have to understand what sin is. Sin, as it begins in the Garden of Eden, is a distrust of God. Eve begins by distrusting God's goodness. It is then deliberate disobedience. And finally then displacing God in my life so that I put myself in the place of God as the one who determines what is good for me, the way my life should go. Therefore, of course, the Bible is given to us in order to bring us back into fellowship with God, which means an obedience, which means giving God his rightful place in our lives. So our sinfulness obviously keeps us from hearing the Bible, because we want to go our own way and the Bible wants to bring us back to God. So in a general and fundamental sense, that's how sin hinders. Of course, sin in a sense then is pride because it is putting me in the place where God should be. Specific sins then of course come under that and also hinder. I mean, if I have been committing specific sins, if there are specific things I want to do, be they sexual sins or other kinds of sins that I'm habitually doing, obviously then I'll try to justify those, twist Scripture to

justify my lifestyle. And so... repentance of sin and humility before God is absolutely essential to truly understand the Bible, to truly allow the Bible to impact my own life.

Dr. Miguel Nunez (translation)

The sinner who has never received the Lord and has never given his life to Christ, still has his mind in darkness, and it's his sin that has his mind in darkness. But for the believer who is born again, who has the Spirit in his life, our relationship with the Spirit, our holy life, has plenty to do with our ability to understand the Scriptures. Sin turns me away from God, so that when I'm far from God I can't understand God's revelation as well as when I'm near to him. Maybe the best way to illustrate this is by thinking about the light from a lamp when I'm reading a book. The closer I get to the light, the better I see. And if I get far from it, I begin to see a shadow that darkens the pages of the book I'm reading. So now it will be more difficult to read because the light is far away. But it's my sin that keeps me away from the light, keeps me away from God. Once again, the illumination that God's Spirit gives us has to do with the filling of the Spirit. When I'm living a life of sin, I'm less full. And when I'm less full, I have less understanding. So, I believe that the preacher, the ordinary believer, all need to understand that there is a direct relationship between our life of holiness and our ability to understand God's Word. That's why, in the past, great men of God with great understanding of the Word — great teachers of the Word — also had great lives of holiness. One thing is impossible without the other. I cannot have a great holy life if I don't understand the Scriptures well. But understanding the Scriptures well requires a life of holiness and a close walk with God.

Question 8:

What role should our current beliefs play in our interpretation of the Bible?

What we believe about the inspiration of the Scriptures and the authority of the Bible affects how we interpret any given passage of the Bible. And this is true for any theological category. We'll never be able to separate ourselves from our current beliefs when we read the text. So, what role should our current beliefs play in our interpretation of the Bible?

Dr. David R. Bauer

In terms of what role our beliefs play in the interpretation of Scripture, the first thing we need to acknowledge is they will play a role. There's no way of leaving them aside entirely. And I, for one, don't think we should leave them entirely aside, or try to. They often inform in very positive ways our understanding of the Scriptures. And they certainly help us to make connections between what the Scripture is saying and our experience, our own Christian or religious experience. I do believe firmly in an inductive approach though, to the study of the Bible, which seeks intentionally to allow the biblical text to speak on its own terms to us. And I am very concerned that we not co-opt the message of the Bible or any passage within the Bible to our own

prior belief systems. The authority of the Bible means, among other things, allowing the Bible to speak to us its own different message. Not simply conforming to our to the presuppositions, including our doctrinal presuppositions, with which we come to the text, but challenging them. Luther has a wonderful expression; it's Latin. He refers to the Bible as *adversarius noster*, as our adversary. Certainly, he meant a beneficent, gentle sort of adversary, but an adversary nonetheless, by which he really meant that the Bible always challenges our beliefs, our presuppositions, and really that of the church. And that both the church as a whole, and we as individual Christians, are constantly in need of reformation, of hearing the different challenging confrontational word of Scripture. And really, the only way to do that is to be intentional in not allowing our presuppositions, including our doctrinal presuppositions, to determine ahead of time what the Scriptures, or a passage of Scripture means.

Dr. John Oswalt

When we come to the Bible, necessarily we bring with us all of our own understandings, all of our own context, if you will. And I think there are two important issues that have to be addressed there. On the one hand, I need to be as aware as I can of my current beliefs. What am I bringing to the text? Then I need to be saying, alright, given that this is the way I think and the way I believe, what does the text say about that? How does the text... how should the text alter those? How should the text correct those? At the same time, we recognize that the way we appropriate the text is going to be based upon who we are and where we are. So, as I say, we need to be, on the one hand, honest about what our beliefs are. At the same time, we need to allow the text to address those in any way that it needs to.

Question 9:

How should we prepare to read the Scriptures, and why is deliberate preparation so important?

As anyone who's read the Bible would affirm, it's a complex book. We have to consider many different questions as we read through its pages. So, it's essential that we spend time preparing to read and study the Scriptures. But how should we prepare to read the Scriptures, and why is deliberate preparation so important?

Rev. Michael J. Glodo

We should prepare ourselves to read the Scriptures and be deliberate about it when we do for several reasons. One is its precious. The Bible says that the law of God is more precious than precious metals; it's life giving. So, when we pick up the Bible to study it, we should do so realizing we have something very precious, very meaningful, very desirable in our hands. Secondly, we should deliberately prepare ourselves by asking that God would reveal himself to us. That's the entire purpose of Scripture summed up, that it's God's self-revelation, his personal act to make himself known to us, and we should never study the Bible without that in mind. And then thirdly I would say we should be deliberate by acquiring skills, by acquiring

competencies, how to read text, how to understand the author's role and meaning, how to understand how words are put together to shape meaning so that we develop actual skills. But the first two must precede that third one.

Dr. Brian J. Vickers

I think it's important when we study the Scripture that we do have a rigorous and sort of well-thought-out method for doing so according to and depending on what we're reading, the parts of Scripture we're reading, the kind of thing we're reading in Scripture. And the great strength about having a rigorous methodology when we're studying Scripture is we're applying sort of careful investigation to the study of Scripture rather than just, say, opening it up and waiting for something to pop out at us, whatever sort of strikes me that day as being important. And to me, the greatest strength about following a methodology for studying the Scriptures is that it makes it less likely that I'm just going to make the Bible say what I want it to say, which, we all have a tendency to do that anyway. But we have sort of a methodology that we're following. Whether it's steps or what have you — however we do it — or asking particular questions of a text, hopefully that helps us see what the text has to say for itself... Because we all bring our own ideas to it and our own backgrounds. And so maybe rather than just that one verse that just happens to speak to me that day for some reason... I mean, that's great and that's important and we need to hear those kinds of things from the Bible. But if I'm going to preach or teach a text, people don't need to hear just how this text is striking me. Not just that. What they need to hear is what is God saying in this text and how's it being said? And having a methodology that we follow can help. It doesn't ensure that we do it but it can help us sort of reach that goal.

Question 10:

In what ways should we rely on the Holy Spirit as we study Scripture?

With any given text, we tend to rely on our own abilities to understand what it means. And yet, this approach won't bring us to a full understanding of a biblical passage because we aren't the only active participants when we read and interpret Scripture. The Holy Spirit, the source of the Scriptures, provides illumination. But why is this important? In what ways should we rely on the Holy Spirit as we study Scripture?

Dr. Thomas J. Nettles

One of the issues that every Christian has to deal with when he comes to the Bible, and he reads the Bible, and wants to interpret the Bible properly, is related to the necessary conviction that the Bible is the result of at least three actions of the work of the Spirit. Perhaps more if we would extend that. But one, there is the revelation of a truth which is given by the Holy Spirit in particular ways. And then there is inspiration in which how this truth is to be communicated when a particular situation is given. And then there is the work of the Spirit in the believer illuminating his mind

to understand this ... So we need to approach the Bible with the full conviction that it is the Word of God. It is a message; it is a coherent message. And that all the different pericopes of Scripture do not stand alone, but they are building a case that God is setting forth for us. He's setting forth an argument for us so that we can see clearly... what his purpose is in governing the world and purpose is in redeeming us. So, in that general sense, we recognize that God's superintending of this process means that all of it is true and it all ties together. But we also recognize that he has spoken to us in language and words. And just as it arises — as I think as we've talked about it before — it arises out of particular human situations and historical situations, so the interpretation of it is dependent upon our understanding of grammar and syntax and language and historical situations. We study these things. We cannot simply say, "Because it's inspired, therefore I have no obligation to understand it." We understand it in a very human way. There's one sense in which we could say, we must try to understand the Bible as if the Holy Spirit has nothing to do with our understanding of it — as if he has written it, he has left it, and now he says, "Understand it." Now, that is not the case, but I think that we receive the illuminating work of the Spirit only as we work very hard to understand the language. There are some texts that I have studied, and I thought that I have understood them, and I have preached them in a certain way. And I discovered later I was not preaching falsely, but there were certain things in there I was missing simply because I didn't understand a broader context or how a word was used in a different place the Scripture. Or how another theological idea was sort of hidden under the assumptions of this passage. So as I study it and expand my knowledge of Scripture, I find that there is a greater spiritual delight, and there is a greater illumination that comes into my mind to be able to preach that text better the next time I do it.

Dr. Guy Waters

It is important to remember that all Scripture is given by inspiration of God, that is, God has breathed out the Scriptures. We speak of plenary inspiration, that is, from beginning to end. We speak of verbal inspiration, that is, down to the very words. And according to Jesus's promises in places like John 14, John 16, this is the work particularly of God the Holy Spirit. That gives us the confidence that when we open up the Bible, we know that it is true, and we know that every word has proceeded from the mouth of the Lord. And so it has the authority of God himself. And that's going to shape and affect the way we read and handle the Scripture. At the same time, it doesn't mean that we don't pick up the Bible and read it, and apply ourselves, and work hard to understand its meaning. But even in saying that, we need to appreciate that there is an ongoing work of the Holy Spirit, not inspiration, as though he were speaking words into our ears or our minds, but we call this work illumination. That is, that he enables us to understand fully, savingly, what God has said in his Word. He shines, as it were, upon our minds so that we can understand fully what God has said in the Scripture. And that's a wonderful promise, because it means for all the difficulties that we face when we pick up the Scripture to read it, that God's people always come away learning and knowing what God intended for them to know from the Scripture, namely, what must be believed and what must be done for salvation. And for all the questions we may bring to any text of Scripture or that we may take

away from the text of Scripture, that's a wonderful, comforting assurance that we will never rise in doubt as to the answer of that question: what does the Scripture say about what I must believe and what I must do in order to be saved?

Dr. Greg Perry

We should rely on the Holy Spirit as we read the Bible for several reasons. First of all, Paul in writing to Timothy tell us that the Scriptures are God-breathed, that the Spirit of God is the one who has given the Scriptures to the people of God. And so they come to us with God's authority, with a sense of the veracity and the truthfulness that is befitting God's character. And so as the source it's really important. But also in terms of the destination of the Scriptures, the Scriptures are given primarily to the people of God. And the Spirit has given gifts to the entire community of God. And so as we read the Scriptures, we understand not only that the Spirit has given the Scriptures through the author's inspiration, but also in terms of the gifts of receiving the Scriptures within the community of God, the different gifts that the Spirit has given to the church. And then thirdly, we're told that the Spirit is given to each one of us. And so inside my life or your life, as a Christian, as a follower of Jesus, we've been given the Spirit of God. And so the Spirit's own work in our individual walk with Christ is an important aspect of influencing how we read the Scriptures as well. So, from the author, to the community, to you and I as individuals, the Spirit is at work in all three of those arenas. And it's really beneficial to remember the Spirit's work in those ways as we read the Bible.

Question 11:

What kind of impact should inspiration have on the way we interpret Scripture?

The doctrine of inspiration affirms God's role in the writing of the Bible. This doctrine should then have significant implications for how we read the text. What kind of impact should inspiration have on the way we interpret Scripture?

Dr. Robert G. Lister

The inspiration of Scripture should have a profound effect on our interpretation of Scripture, because while we do come to the Scriptures as the words written by David and Moses and Paul, we also understand that these are the breathed-out words of God. And so we come to the Scriptures unlike we come to any other document. The inspiration of Scripture is not like Shakespeare's being inspired. Shakespeare, we might think of being inspired in the sense of being great, great literature, classic literature. And the Scriptures, while having spectacular literary qualities, are more than just great literature. They are the words of God, the authoritative words of God to mankind. And so with that understanding of inspiration, we come to the Scriptures and we understand that unlike any other text, we have a place to acknowledge the authority of the Word of God ... So when we read the Scriptures, we come under its authority and not as the authority. We come not to criticize Scripture but, when

necessary, to be criticized by Scripture. We recognize that it, as the Word of God, has a unique authority for all of our lives. And so we come to it with that kind of recognition in a way that we wouldn't come to any other text.

It's always important to prepare ourselves before we come to interpret any passage of Scripture. Our current beliefs, our interpretive tools, and our past experiences all play a part in how we read the text. When we keep these kinds of factors in mind, we can better prepare ourselves to interpret what the Bible is saying. And in turn, we can be better prepared to share that message with others.

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