



Interpreting the New Testament

Teaching Notes

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Lesson 1

Introduction

The first lesson is designed to introduce students to the practice of biblical interpretation. We will give a simple and clear definition of biblical interpretation, and we will take time to explain why it is important that Christians strive to study God's Word, understand it clearly, and communicate it faithfully to others. For the second major section of this lesson, we will define the various genres of writing found in the Bible and explain how each one needs to be considered when studying Scripture.

Part 1 – Definition and Importance of Bible Interpretation

Consider this. A few years ago a group of African pastors who were students in seminaries and Bible schools were asked a question: "What has been the most valuable training you have received in your studies at your school?" Every student said that a course in biblical interpretation had been the most important to them. When one student was asked why he said that, this was his reply:

I have always believed in the Bible. I believed it is the Word of God. I believed it is completely true. I believed it shows us everything we need to believe and how to live. But I didn't know what to do with it. Now I know how to study the Bible and understand it, and I can teach the people in my church to understand God's Word, too!

In this course, we want to help you gain the knowledge and the ability to study the Bible, to understand what God is teaching us through it, and to explain that truth to others in your church so that they can understand and obey God.

ASK: Tell us a little about your own experience learning to study the Bible. Have you ever taken a class on this? Has another pastor or leader taught you how to study the Bible? Can you briefly explain what you learned from this. [*Note to teacher:* invite a few of the students to share their experience, but keep this short. This question is an opportunity for students to reflect on their previous experience and begin thinking about the topic.]

What is Biblical Interpretation?

Biblical Interpretation is the careful work of studying the Bible in order to understand God's message to the original hearers, to identify the unchanging truth He has revealed, and explain how that truth changes the beliefs and the lives of Christians today.

The Bible itself gives many reasons why we need to carefully study and interpret its teachings:

1. God's Word is completely true and useful for all that we need to live as Christians. (2 Tim. 3:16)
2. There are treasure of truth and wisdom to be found by looking deeply into Scripture. (Ps. 119:18)
3. God has given leaders to his Church to train all the believers in truth and to build them up into unity in Christ. (Eph. 4:11-13)

4. We are called to work hard as teachers of God's Word so that we will not be ashamed when we stand before him. (2 Tim. 2:15)
5. We are commanded to proclaim the truth of God's Word and to teach correct doctrine, even in times when we are surrounded by different kinds of false teaching. (2 Tim. 4:2-3)
6. Some of the truths we find in the Bible are not easy to understand, and they require us to work hard to understand them clearly. (2 Pet. 3:15-16)
7. The truth of God's Word never changes, and those of us who teach it must be careful to teach everything God has commanded faithfully. (Matt. 5:19; James 3:1)

All of these verses show us that we must take God's Word seriously and learn to study it and teach it the way that God intended. It is much more than a book of helpful stories or secrets to a better life. It is the Word of the Living God who speaks to us so that we may know him and love him. In this course we will learn a method for studying and interpreting the New Testament that will help you understand any part of the New Testament and teach it faithfully and clearly to others in your church.

ASK: Why do pastors and church leaders need to learn how to study and understand the Bible well? Which of these reasons we explained seems the most important to you? Why?

Part 2: Genres of Writing in the New Testament

Did you know that the New Testament contains several different kinds of writing for us to study and understand? Each of these different kinds of writing has a slightly different purpose and distinct features that we need to recognize so that we can correctly interpret their message.

Even today, we know that the different things we might read are understood differently. If you are studying a book of road laws in order to take the test for your drivers license, you know that you must interpret every word exactly as it reads. "Stop" means stop and nothing else. A green light always means go. On the other hand, we often use words in love songs and poems that we know are figurative or symbolic. For example, if a man sings, "My love conquers mountains," no one expects to find a flat place where the mountain used to be because this man and his love visited it. Even in our homes, we use language that needs to be understood based on the situation. A child might say, "Mommy, I'm starving!" The child might feel hungry and want to eat, but usually he is in no danger of dying from hunger at that moment.

In the same way that each of these situations causes us to listen to the messages differently, each of the different kinds of writing in the New Testament requires us to read closely and ask different questions to understand its message best.

What is a genre?

A genre is a particular kind – or category – of writing. We are going to study four different genres of writing that we find in the New Testament. Each of these genres has a different way of teaching us if we are careful to read and study them well. The four kinds of writing we will examine are:

- The stories of the New Testament
- The teachings of Jesus
- The letters in the New Testament
- The book of Revelation.

We will look at these categories one at a time to understand how each one should be read.

- The Stories of the New Testament

The stories – or narratives – of the New Testament are often written in a way that feels similar to other stories we hear or tell to others. One important thing to remember is that every story we read in Scripture is completely true and reveals important truth from God for us to understand.

“The words of the Lord are pure words,
like silver refined in a furnace on the ground,
purified seven times.” (Psalm 12:6)

Stories in the New Testament are found in the four gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John – and the book of Acts.

The four gospels are written to give us a full understanding of who Jesus is, why he came to earth, and what he accomplished while he was here. Each of the gospel writers has a slightly different perspective or emphasis in his reading. Mark emphasizes the power of Jesus and his authority as the Son of God. Matthew highlights that Jesus is the Messiah who God had promised through Jewish prophets to send as a Savior. Luke presents Jesus as a Savior to the whole world, not only for the Jews. And John reveals that Jesus is truly God in human flesh who came to our world to save us from our sin.

Things to remember when reading New Testament stories:

1. The first three gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke – write about Jesus by allowing the person reading to discover who Jesus truly is, starting with his life on earth and showing that He is both God and perfect man. They don’t begin by announcing, “Jesus is the Son of God and Savior of the World.” Instead, each story reveals something about his identity, and his power, and his love, and his plan for his people.
2. The fourth gospel – John – does announce exactly who Jesus is right at the beginning. All through the book, the stories of Jesus are designed to convince the person reading that Jesus deserves to be worshipped as God.
3. Anytime we are reading a story in one of the gospels, the most important question we want to ask is this: “What does this story teach us about Jesus?”
4. The book of Acts must be read with wisdom. It tells the story of the birth of the church of Jesus Christ and work of the Holy Spirit spreading the gospel throughout the world through the testimony and faithfulness of the Apostles and other Christians. Stories in Acts emphasize both the power and Lordship of Jesus over all things as he guides the mission of the church AND the ways that early Christians were learning to follow and obey Jesus as their King.
5. When we read stories in the book of Acts, a key question to ask is: “How does this story reveal Jesus as true Lord and how does it help us follow him and join his mission in this world?”

- The Teachings of Jesus in the New Testament

In addition to the stories about his life, the four gospels record much of what Jesus taught while he was here on earth. That is, the authors of the gospels wrote down exactly what Jesus explained to his disciples so that we can read them and learn from him as well. Jesus is the greatest teacher the world has ever known, but his teachings must be read carefully and with understanding if we are going to interpret them as he intended.

Things to remember when reading the teachings of Jesus:

1. Jesus used many different methods of teaching – including sermons, question and answer with his disciples, object lessons, parables, proverbs, and even riddles. We need to recognize what method he is using if we want to understand what he was trying to teach.
2. Jesus’ proverbs (for example, the Beatitudes in Matthew 5:1-12) should be understood as a general rule or guideline for life. We need to understand them within the context Jesus is speaking. So when Jesus says, “Blessed are poor in spirit,” we cannot interpret it according to our world. The blessing Jesus speaks of has nothing to do with wealth or prosperity in this world; he is speaking of blessing in the Kingdom of Heaven.
3. More than eighty percent of Jesus’ teachings is given in a poetic form. He uses many different expressions, figures of speech, or comparisons and exaggerations to teach spiritual truths. We need to recognize these things and avoid misinterpreting. For example, when Jesus says, “Anyone who does not hate his father and mother and wife and children. . . cannot be my disciple,” he obviously is not telling us to truly hate our family. He is making a point that our love and loyalty to him should be so strong that even our love for family looks like hate in comparison.
4. When reading the parables, we should avoid trying to find a spiritual meaning in every detail. The nature of a parable is to teach one major spiritual truth. Look for that major truth and focus on it.

- The Letters of the New Testament

Out of 27 books in the New Testament, 21 of them are letters, or epistles. That is, each of these books is actually a letter that was originally written from one of the apostles to one or more churches or individuals in the first century. Christians were facing many different kinds of challenges in situations, both in the life of the church and in their lives within their communities, and the letters in the New Testament gave them the truth and instructions they needed to grow in their faith while following the Lord Jesus. These letters often provide the clearest and most detailed explanations of the doctrines we believe as Christians. They also give very specific and practical guidance for living holy lives.

Things to remember when reading the letters of the New Testament:

1. Most of the letters were written to churches or individuals, although a few were not specific (for example, Hebrews and James).
2. Most letters are organized in a basic pattern: author’s name, recipient’s name, greeting and prayer, doctrinal teaching or explanation, practical instructions, and a good-bye.

3. Each letter addresses a specific problem or situation the recipient was facing. Understanding the situation behind the letter is a key to understanding the meaning of its teachings.
4. Remember that these letters were intended to be read aloud to the congregations. Reading the letters would have been a big event for the congregation. Many of the teachings and instructions are directed toward the entire congregation, not just an individual.

- Reading the Book of Revelation

Revelation can be one of the most difficult books in the entire Bible to understand and interpret. For that reason, many Christians avoid trying to study it all. Others get excited about amazing interpretations that may have very little to do with the intended message in the part of Revelation they are studying. So why do so many Christians find Revelation to be such a challenge? There are several reasons for this difficulty. We will explore the book in more detail in our New Testament survey courses. For now, we need to be aware of a few specific details to keep in mind when trying to interpret Revelation.

Things to remember when reading the book of Revelation:

1. Revelation actually combines three different genres of writing. It is a letter like the epistles, but it is also prophecy, and it is what we call an apocalyptic book. This means that it is designed to reveal a spiritual mystery of the Kingdom of heaven breaking into earth in a powerful way.
2. We should always approach Revelation (and any other Scripture) with an attitude of prayer and deep humility. It is good to acknowledge that its teachings are deep, and we are depending on God to help us understand.
3. We must remember the original audience. Revelation was written to people in the first century, and they were expected to understand it. In order to interpret correctly, we need to know what the original audience would have understood.
4. Acknowledge that most of the details in Revelation are symbolic. Prophetic and apocalyptic writing normally use images and details to symbolize the true nature of an object or event. In Revelation, we find details such as numbers, horns, dragons, and many more things that represent something else.
5. Because Revelation includes so many symbols, we should always notice when the author of Revelation (the Apostle John) explains what a symbol means. For example, in 1:20, he tells us that the seven golden lampstands are the churches.
6. Remember the Old Testament when you read Revelation. Revelation includes more references to the Old Testament than any other book in the New Testament, especially the books of Daniel, Ezekiel, and Zechariah. Knowing the teachings of these books well will help you recognize some of the symbols found in Revelation.

Each of these four genres, or categories, of New Testament writings reveals truth from God in slightly different ways. If we understand what to look for when reading stories, teachings from Jesus, letters, or even the book of Revelation, we will be prepared to interpret each passage more accurately. So remember the details we explained about each different kind of writing. They will be helpful to you when we begin the process of biblical interpretation in the next lesson.

Part 3 – Review

Review the most important points that were covered.

ASK: What are seven reasons that it is important to study and interpret the Bible accurately?

1. God's Word is completely true and useful for all that we need to live as Christians. (2 Tim. 3:16)
2. There are treasure of truth and wisdom to be found by looking deeply into Scripture. (Ps. 119:18)
3. God has given leaders to his Church to train all the believers in truth and to build them up into unity in Christ. (Eph. 4:11-13)
4. We are called to work hard as teachers of God's Word so that we will not be ashamed when we stand before him. (2 Tim. 2:15)
5. We are commanded to proclaim the truth of God's Word and to teach correct doctrine, even in times when we are surrounded by different kinds of false teaching. (2 Tim. 4:2-3)
6. Some of the truths we find in the Bible are not easy to understand, and they require us to work hard to understand them clearly. (2 Pet. 3:15-16)
7. The truth of God's Word never changes, and those of us who teach it must be careful to teach everything God has commanded faithfully. (Matt. 5:19; James 3:1)

ASK: What are the four major kinds – or genres – of writing in the New Testament that we discussed? Explain one thing we need to remember when reading each one.

- The stories of the New Testament.
- The teachings of Jesus.
- The letters in the New Testament.
- The book of Revelation.

Interpreting the New Testament

Lesson 2

Introduction

In this lesson, we will introduce a plan for studying and interpreting Scripture that will be helpful through all the classes of this Bible School and for many more years as you study the Bible yourself and teach its truths to others. Our desire is to learn to study the Bible in a careful and wise way that allows us to understand clearly what God is saying, and then to apply his truth to our own lives. The plan we will follow to help us is called the Interpretive Journey.¹ The Interpretive Journey is a five-step plan which guides us through the process of digging deeply into the Scripture to observe all that it says, prayerfully interpreting the meaning of what we observe, and then carefully applying all that God has revealed to us in our lives, our families, our churches, and our communities.

Part 1 – Explanation of the Interpretive Journey

As stated above, the Interpretive Journey is a clear five-step process for studying and understanding the Bible. It can be used to study any genre or passage of Scripture in the Old or New Testament. Look closely at the picture below. This picture illustrates the five steps in the Interpretive Journey, and it will be used throughout the rest of this course as a reminder of each step and its meaning. Students will be required to identify and explain the five steps of the Interpretive Journey using this picture on the final exam. A full-page copy of this picture is included at the end of this lesson.



¹ The Interpretive Journey was developed by Drs. J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays of Ouachita Baptist University and is used in this course with the authors' permission. A complete explanation of the Interpretive Journey can be found in their book, *Grasping God's Word*, 3rd ed. Zondervan Academic: 2012.

- **Step One – Grasping the Text in Their Town**

Key Question: What did the text mean to the original audience?

The first step in the Interpretive Journey is to grasp the text we are studying in their town. “Their town” refers to the context of the original hearers of the passage of Scripture we are studying. For example, if we are reading the Sermon on the Mount, “their town” refers to Galilee in the time of Jesus’ ministry. Our aim would be to discover what the people of Galilee would have understood when they heard Jesus teaching at that time. This includes considering all kinds of information about background, culture, language, and situation, as well as carefully studying the text itself and the words and explanations that Jesus uses. We will discuss this step more clearly later in this lesson and have a chance to practice it.

- **Step Two – Measure the Width of the River to Cross**

Key Question: What are the differences between the biblical audience and us?

The river in our picture represents that gap between “our town” (the time, place, and culture where we live today) and “their town” (the original audience). Knowing the differences between our context and the context of the original audience helps us recognize which parts of the message they received that might not be the same for us.

For example, in Mark 12:17, Jesus said, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.” However, today we have no emperor, and there is no longer a Caesar in Rome. Does that mean that this verse means nothing to us? Of course not! The people Jesus was speaking to lived under the rule of Caesar, the emperor of Rome. When Jesus commanded them to “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s,” he was telling them governments have the authority (under God) to tax their people, and that his disciples should also obey these laws.

To measure the width of the river between our town and theirs, we need to consider differences in language, culture, situations, and even our relationship to God. We will explore this step later in this lesson as well.

- **Step Three – Cross the Bridge of Timeless Truth**

Key Question: What is the unchanging biblical truth in this text?

In step three, we finally cross the bridge from their town to our town. In the first two steps, we carefully observed and studied all of the background and details of the passage. The goal was to understand what God was saying to the biblical audience. Now we must decide how to carry that truth from God’s Word into our world. This step requires us to identify which parts of God’s message apply only to the situation of the first recipients, and which part is timeless truth. We are looking for the truths or principles that are unchanging in any time, place, or situation.

A good example of this can be seen in 2 Corinthians 13:12, when Paul instructs the Christians at Corinth to “Greet one another with a holy kiss.” Today, it is not common for Christian men and women to kiss one another when we gather. If we begin to teach that everyone in the church should start kissing when we meet, our churches will have serious problems very quickly. However, we can recognize a timeless truth that Christians should welcome one another with warmth and affection, even if we do not kiss.

- **Step Four – Check the Biblical Map**

Key Question: How does our timeless truth fit with the rest of the Bible?

Step four is an important moment. After working hard to understand God’s message to those in the Bible times, then deciding how to carry the timeless truth of his Word to people today, we need to pause and check our work. Did we find the right message? How can we know if we are getting it wrong? The answer is to check the biblical map. Of course, there is not a picture map in your Bible that tells you if you are correct. This step means we need to think about the timeless truths we have found and compare them to what is taught in the rest of the Bible. We know that God never contradicts himself, so anything we teach from our passage must agree with what the rest of the Bible teaches.

One day a pastor was speaking to his friend and said, “I have been praying, and I believe that God is leading me to divorce my wife and start a new ministry with a different woman.” Was he hearing God correctly? Absolutely not!! How do we know that? Because God clearly says, “I hate divorce” (Malachi 2:16), and Jesus says, “Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery” (Luke 16:18). Since we know that God does not contradict himself, we know that this man was not hearing from God. In the same way, if we discover that the timeless truth we are trying to teach disagrees with other parts of the Bible, then we know we have made a mistake.

- **Step Five – Grasp the Text in Our Town**

Key Question: How should individual Christians and churches today live out the timeless truths of God’s Word?

Finally, after all the work of observing the Scripture to understand its message and interpreting it to teach it clearly, this is the step where we learn to apply the truth of God’s Word to our lives and communities today. In step five we must consider the situations that our own people live in today and show how the timeless truth from the Bible teaches and helps them to live before God.

ASK: What are the five steps of the Interpretive Journey? What is the Key Question that goes with each step?

DISCUSS: Have you ever tried to study the Bible in an organized plan like this? Compare this process to the ways you have been taught to study Scripture before. How do you think that a plan like this can help you improve?

Part 2 – Observation Steps in the Interpretive Journey

For this part of our lesson, we will focus on the first two steps in the Interpretive Journey. Step one is “Grasp the text in their town.” Step two is “Measure the width of the river to cross.” Each of these steps require carefully observing the text we want to study and learning everything that we can about God’s message in a specific passage. Before we try to decide what a passage means for us and the lives we are living, we need to understand what it meant to the people who first received the message. Just like you would never read a letter written from David Livingstone to his wife without wanting to know where he was or what was happening in their lives at that time, we don’t want to read the New Testament without

knowing what was happening in the lives of God's people at that time. We will understand God's message much more clearly when we learn the situation of those who received the teachings of the New Testament.

- **Step One – Grasp the Text in Their Town**

As we said before, the goal of this step is to understand exactly God was communicating to the people who first received the teachings of the New Testament.

First, we want to focus on looking deeply into a specific passage of Scripture to understand everything we can about what it says and what is happening. Much of the information we want to learn at this point is found in the passage itself or in the paragraphs surrounding it. You might also find help from a good study Bible or the notes from your New Testament Survey classes that you are taking this year. Here are several of the basic questions you should try to answer while working to grasp the text in their town:

- What is happening in this passage? Describe the situation.
- When is this happening?
- Where is it happening?
- Who wrote this book?
- Who is it written to?
- Who is speaking?
- Who is being spoken to?
- Exactly what is being said or taught? Be specific and note details and important words.
- Is there any response from the audience? If so, what is it?
- What does the author or speaker expect the hearers to do in response?

Second, we want to consider the history and context of this passage. This can be a little more difficult, and again background information from a study Bible or a New Testament survey class can be helpful.

Historical Context – Where does this passage fit in the history of the New Testament?

- What country or kingdom did this take place in?
- Who was the king or ruler?
- What was the situation of the people who received this message? Are they free or slave? Rich or poor? Male or female? Young or old? Jew or Gentile? Happy, unhappy, confused, hurting?
- Did this passage occur before or after the death and resurrection of Jesus? Before or after Pentecost?

Literary Context – Where does this passage fit with the whole message of the chapter, the book, or the whole Bible?

- What is the genre – or kind of writing – you are studying in this passage?
- What happened or what is written immediately before and after the passage you are studying?
- What is the main theme of the book you are studying? How does this passage relate to that theme?

- Where does this passage fit in the flow and outline of the entire book? Is it part of the beginning? Is it a critical explanation in the middle? Is it a summary at the end?

Third, we want to create a short, simple statement which explains the message that God was teaching the people who first received this teaching. This can be written in one or two sentences that summarize the most important points of your passage. For example, your summary sentence might begin with:

- Paul instructed the Ephesians to . . .
- Jesus encouraged his disciples by . . .

This first step of grasping the text in their town is critically important to our work in the Interpretive Journey. If we do not clearly understand exactly what God was teaching the original recipients of this message, we will not be able to do any of the following steps well. The first step can take a lot of time, but it helps us get started on the right path of interpreting the Bible accurately. We will look at the second step in a little more detail, then we will practice these steps together as a group.

- **Step Two – Measure the Width of the River to Cross**

The second step of our Interpretive Journey requires us to consider the width of the river between our town and their town. That means we need to think carefully about all the ways that our lives and world today are different than the lives and world of the people who were the original recipients of the text we are studying. To see the differences between our world and theirs, we need to consider several different categories:

- Language – What language was this passage written in originally? (Hint: The entire New Testament was originally written in Greek.) How is that language similar or different from the language you speak? Can you see any ways that their language or expressions might influence the way that we understand a passage?
- Time – When was this written? And when exactly did this occur? The entire New Testament occurs in the first century AD, almost 2000 years ago. Much has happened and much has changed since that time. Remember how different the world must have been that long ago.
- Culture – What do we know about the culture we are studying? Were they Jewish? Roman? Greek? How were their families and communities similar to ours or different? Did they share the same values and priorities that we do today? What kind of things did they do or what did they value that is difficult for us to understand?
- Situation – How is their life situation similar to or different from ours? Did they work the same kind of jobs that we do? How was their relationship to their government? Were they poorer than us or richer? Were they more or less educated? Were they facing pressures or difficulties that we do not understand? How would these things affect the way they received the message of our passage?
- Relationship to God – We live long after the completion of the New Testament. The birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus have already occurred. Pentecost has already happened, and the Holy Spirit indwells Christians all over the world.

We have the entire New Testament, and we also have the testimony and teachings of almost 2000 years of Christian history to help us. But what about those we are reading about in the New Testament? Were they hearing this message before or after the cross and resurrection? Did they have the Holy Spirit dwelling in them? The answers to these questions are very important in understanding the teaching they received.

Part 3 – PRACTICE, Jesus Calms a Storm

Lead the class to read the following passage and answer the following questions together. We will follow the Interpretive Journey, but we are only doing the observation steps (step one and two)

Read Mark 4:35-41.

On that day when evening had come, he said to them, “Let us go across to the other side [of the Sea of Galilee].” And leaving the crowd, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. And other boats were with him. And a great windstorm arose, and waves were breaking into the boat, so that the boat was already filling. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion. And they woke him and said to him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing? And he awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm. He said to them, “Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?” And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?” (Mark 4:35-41, ESV)

- **Step One – Grasp the Text in Their Town**

Instruct the group to look closely at the verses and answer as many of the following questions as possible just from reading the text.

ASK

Observing the Situation

- What is happening in this passage? Describe the situation.
Students should work together to retell the story in their own words. Include as many details as possible, and be very specific about words spoken and the order that events happened.
- When is this happening?
This happens during the time of Jesus’ ministry on earth, somewhere around the year AD 30.
- Where is it happening?
This event happens on the Sea of Galilee; today this is in the northern part of Israel.

- Who wrote this book?
This gospel is written by Mark.
- Who is speaking?
The story includes speaking by both Jesus and the disciples. Jesus is the main focus.
- Who is being spoken to?
Again, both Jesus and the disciples are spoken to, but the most important message is spoken to the disciples.
- Exactly what is being said or taught? Be specific and note details and important words.
At first, the disciples felt afraid of the storm because they thought they might die. They woke Jesus and asked, "Don't you care?" After Jesus calmed the storm by simply speaking, he said to the disciples, "Why are you so afraid?" Then the disciples were afraid again, but this time their fear came from feeling shocked about the power that Jesus had displayed. Their final question is the most important point of the story: "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"
- Is there any response from the audience? If so, what is it?
The disciples are shocked and afraid, unsure of what to do or say after Jesus calms the storm. They feared the power of the storm, but Jesus displayed perfect power to control the storm by only speaking to it.
- What does the author or speaker expect the hearers to do in response?
The clearest hint is in the final question, "Who then is this?" Both the disciples and those reading the story are expected to find an answer to the question. Who do you believe Jesus is now that you know what kind of power he possesses?

Observing the Context

- Historical Context
 - Where does this passage fit in the history of the New Testament?
This passage is in the gospels, toward the beginning of Mark's gospel.
 - What country or kingdom did this take place in?
This takes place in Israel (or Galilee) on the Sea of Galilee.
 - Who was the king or ruler?
There are local rulers over the Jewish people, but Caesar is the ruler of the Roman Empire, including the Jews.
 - What was the situation of the people who received this message? Are they free or slave? Rich or poor? Male or female? Young or old? Jew or Gentile? Happy, unhappy, confused, hurting?
The disciples were Jewish men, not too young or too old. They had been seeking a Messiah, and now they had hopes that Jesus might be the one to set them free from bondage to Rome. Mark wrote his gospel to Gentile Christians in the Roman empire. He wrote to all kinds of people to show them who Jesus truly is.
 - Did this passage occur before or after the death and resurrection of Jesus? Before or after Pentecost?
This story occurs long before the death and resurrection of Jesus, near the

beginning of his ministry. The disciples know little about his true identity at this point.

- **Literary Context**
 - What is the genre – or kind of writing – you are studying in this passage?
This passage comes from the gospels and is one of the stories of Jesus' life.
 - What happened or what is written immediately before and after the passage you are studying?
Immediately before, in Mark 4:1-34, Jesus tells a series of parables about the nature of God's Kingdom and how it grows. He only explained things plainly to the disciples, to everyone else he spoke in parables that they did not completely understand.
Immediately after, in Mark 5, Jesus displays power over demons by healing a man possessed by a Legion of demons, then he displays power of death by raising the daughter of the synagogue ruler from the dead.
 - What is the main theme of the book you are studying? How does this passage relate to that theme?
The book of Mark emphasizes the Jesus is the true Son of God come to earth to save us. This passage shows that Jesus has power which is much greater than an average man.
 - Where does this passage fit in the flow and outline of the entire book? Is it part of the beginning? Is it a critical explanation in the middle? Is it a summary at the end?
In Mark 4, the disciples ask who Jesus is? In Mark 8, Jesus asks the disciples who they believe he is. (This is when Peter says, "You are the Christ." In Mark 9, God the Father announces, "This is my beloved Son. Listen to him." The passage we are studying begins a major theme of revealing the true identity of Jesus Christ as God's Son who came from heaven to save us.

Create a Short, Simple Statement

- Explain the most important truth that is taught in this passage.
Example: In Mark 4:35-41, Jesus reveals to the disciples that he has power over all nature, and they begin to wonder who Jesus truly is.

• **Step Two – Measure the Width of the River to Cross**

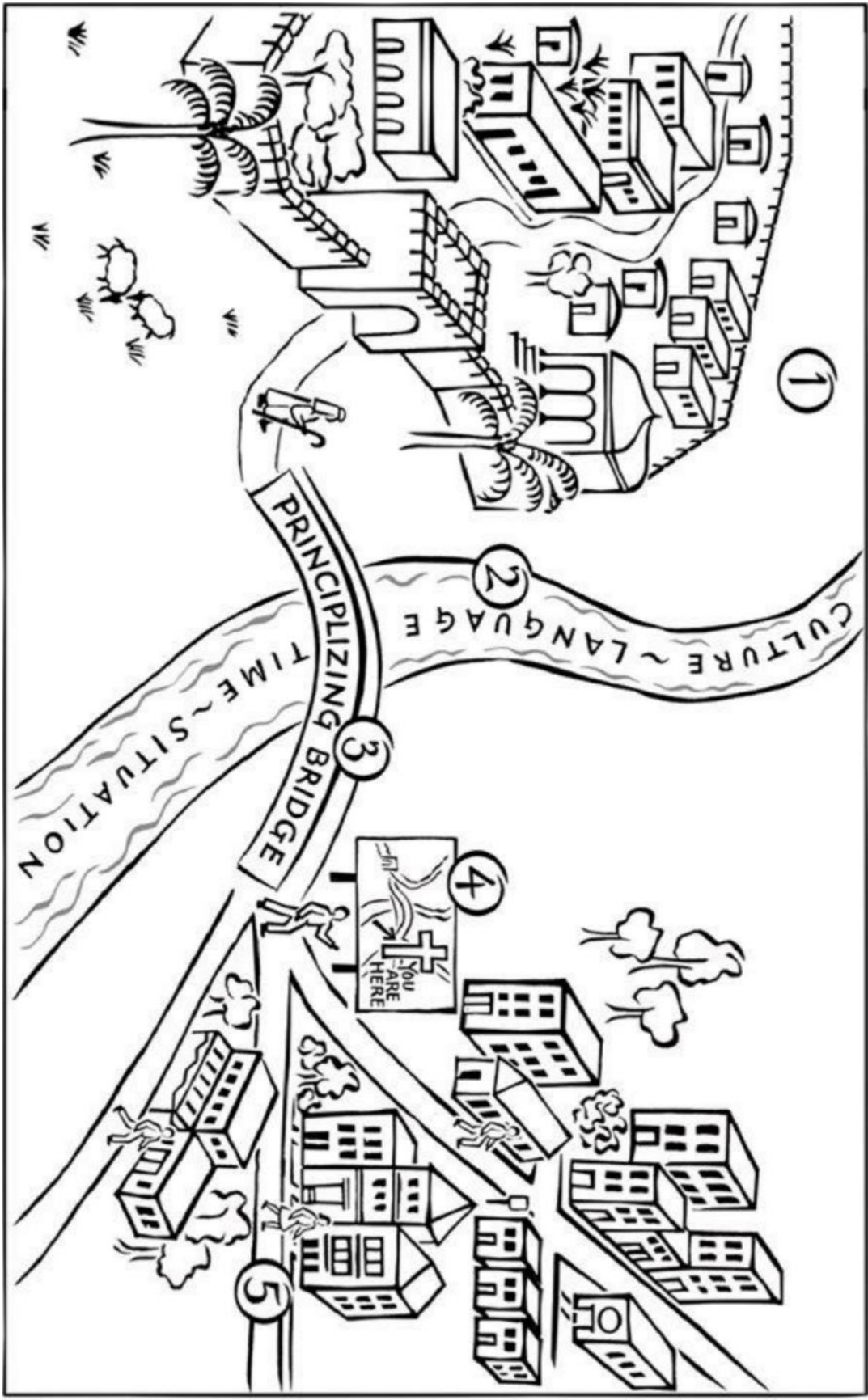
For this step, encourage the students to discuss what they know of each of the major categories listed below.

- Language – What language were Jesus and the disciples speaking? What language did Mark write in? Do the differences between their languages and the language that we are speaking influence how we understand this?
- Time – When was all this happening? What do we know today that they did not know?

- Culture – What was important to the disciples in their culture that is not as familiar to us today? (For example, they lived in a Jewish culture eagerly waiting for a Messiah. We are waiting for our Savior to return, although many Christians today do not seem as eager as Jews did back then.)
- Situation – What are some significant ways that our situation is similar to or different from the situation the disciples were in?
- Relationship to God – What was the disciples’ relationship to God in this story? What about the original readers of Mark’s gospel? How is their relationship to God like ours or different from ours?

ASK: What are the most important similarities between this story (their town) and our story (our town?) What are some important differences?

ASK: Would you consider the river between their town and our town to be extremely wide (major, important differences), narrow (small differences), or something in between? Why do you think that?



Lesson 3

Introduction

In the last lesson, we introduced the Interpretive Journey as a clear plan to study and interpret any passage of Scripture in the New Testament. Then, we examined the first two steps more closely, observing all the details and background information available to help us discover what message God was giving through the verses we are studying. In this lesson, we will move beyond observation to the task of interpreting the meaning of our passage. We want to determine exactly how God's Word that was revealed to people in the Bible continue to speak to us today. To do this, we need to learn the next two steps in the Interpretive Journey. Step Three is crossing the bridge of timeless truth. In this step, we will think carefully about how to carry the unchanging truth that God revealed from "their town" to "our town." In Step Four we will consult the biblical map. This is an important checkpoint for us to be certain that our interpretation of the Scripture we are studying agrees with the rest of the Bible.

Part 1 – Quick Review

Before we move deeper into our study of Steps Three and Four, take a few minutes to review the basics of the Interpretive Journey with the students. Point to the different numbers (1-5) on the picture in Lesson Two. Ask the students to name the five steps and the key question that needs to be answered with each step. Remind the students to memorize the picture, the steps, and the key questions. This will be part of their final exam for this course.

ASK

What are the five steps in the Interpretive Journey? And what is the key question for each step?

- Step 1: Grasp the text in their town.
 - Key Question: What did the text mean to the original audience?
 - ASK: What do we mean when we say, "their town?"
- Step 2: Measure the width of the river to cross.
 - Key Question: What are the differences between the biblical audience and us?
 - ASK: What does the river represent in our picture?
- Step 3: Cross the bridge of timeless truth.
 - Key Question: What is the unchanging truth that God reveals in this text?
- Step 4: Consult the biblical map.
 - Key Question: How does our timeless truth fit with the rest of the Bible?
- Step 5: Grasp the text in our town.
 - Key Question: How should individual Christians and churches today live out the timeless truth?

Part 2 – Interpretation Steps in the Interpretive Journey

The first two steps of the Interpretive Journey taught us to *observe* the text we are studying. We wanted to notice every detail and understand what was happening, why it was happening, and what God was communicating in that passage. These steps require us to take our time and understand as much as possible about the text we are reading.

The next two steps of the Interpretive journey will lead us to *interpret* the meaning of what we have just observed. The task of interpretation is not something that we can expect someone else to tell us directly. If we are to grow in our knowledge of God’s Word, and if we want to teach the people in our churches and communities, we need to learn the skill of correctly interpreting what we read in Scripture. This is not always easy, but it is something we can learn with a lot of prayer, patience, and practice.

- **Step Three – Cross the Bridge of Timeless Truth**

Step Three might be the most challenging step in the Interpretive Journey. It requires us to consider all that we learned in the first two steps when studying the Scripture in “their town” and decide what lessons we need to carry back across the river to teach in “our town.” In this step, we will write out one or more timeless truths (we can also call them biblical principles) which are revealed in our text of Scripture and remain true and important for us today.

This step is different from the first two steps in some important ways. In the observation steps, we focused on reading the text and possibly a study Bible or other tools to help us understand what was happening and why. In this step, our goal is to discover the timeless biblical principles that we need to believe and obey today. Remember our Key Question for this step: “What is the unchanging truth that God reveals in this passage?”

One thing to remember on this step is that our job is not to create meaning in a text or to try to say something clever. Our job is to discover the meaning of what God has spoken in the part of Scripture that we are studying.

If your uncle hears that you are taking a trip to Nakonde, he might send you 500 Kwacha with a message to buy some rice and send it to him. When you read that message, you would understand what he said and do what he asks. You would not read the message and then try to think of a clever way to say that it really means you should buy yourself some new clothes. That would be insulting to your uncle! Instead, you receive his message, you understand his message, and you do what he has asked to show your respect for him. In the same way, after we observe and study God’s Word to understand his meaning, we want to make his meaning clear to others.

To discover the unchanging biblical principles, we will begin by looking back at what we learned in Step One. What was the message God was communicating to the original recipients in the Bible? Be as specific as you can in remembering exactly what God was teaching or what the people were expected to learn or do. Then, think about the differences between “their town” and “our town” that we noted in Step Two. (Don’t worry, we will practice all of this in a few minutes.) We want to identify which parts of God’s message apply in a specific way only to the biblical audience. These parts get left in “their town.” However, we also want to notice the parts of truth that are not specific to that situation. These

are timeless truths that are just as important today as they were a long time ago. These are the principles that we want to carry from “their town” to “our town.”

Let’s look at a quick example. In John 13, Jesus is sharing his final supper with his disciples in an upper room at a house in Jerusalem. When everyone comes inside and is seated around the table, Jesus notices that no one has washed their feet. He gets up from the place of honor at the table, wraps a servant’s towel around himself, and stoops down to wash the feet of each one of his disciples (even Judas!). Peter was shocked that Jesus was take such a humiliating job and tried to stop Jesus from washing his feet, but Jesus explained that this is something he must do. Then he tells his disciples, “If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet” (vs 14).

If we were studying this passage closely, Steps One and Two would give us many helpful and important details to understand the culture and background of that situation. We would learn that washing feet was the lowest job in a house, a job that only a small child or a humble slave could do. No respected man would ever be washing the feet of his guests. We would compare that information to our culture today. We would see that in Zambia there are certain things that a respected man simply will not do. He would have workers and assistants to do lowly tasks.

Now that we are on Step Three, we want to compare what we know about what happened back then and what is happening now. Are there parts of this story that are not part of our world today? Yes! We normally do not keep bowls of water near the door of our homes to wash people’s feet when they enter. This is a detail that is important in the Bible story, but it does not belong in our lives. So when Jesus says, “You also ought to wash one another’s feet,” we might wonder what to do with that. The answer comes in the next two verses. Jesus continues speaking to his disciples and says, “For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him” (vv 15-16). Here is the biblical principle we want to keep! Jesus says he has set an example to follow. We might not wash one another’s feet, but we see that Jesus was humble, not proud. He stepped down from the seat of honor and served his own disciples. Then he told the disciples, “A servant is not greater than his master.” Our timeless truth is that Jesus gave us an example in his humble attitude and his servant actions. This is the lesson we must carry across the bridge to teach in our town.

Here are five questions to consider when writing out the biblical principle or timeless truth from our text:

1. Is this truth reflected clearly in the text?
2. Is this truth timeless and not tied to a specific situation?
3. Is this principle universal and not tied to a particular culture?
4. Does this principle agree with the teaching of the rest of the Bible?
5. Does this principle apply both the biblical audience in “their town” and today’s Christians in “our town?”

Finally, we want to express the timeless truth we have discovered in a short sentence using present tense verbs. Using the example we considered above from John 13, our unchanging biblical principle might be:

“Jesus calls his disciples to follow his example by imitating his humble attitude and his servant actions.”

- **Step Four – Cross the Bridge of Timeless Truth**

Step four might be the shortest step in the Interpretive Journey, but it can be one of the most helpful. The key question for this step is: “How does our timeless truth fit with the rest of the Bible?” We want to consider whether the principle we have found in our study of the text agrees with what is taught in the rest of Scripture. If we find other verses and passages which support the principle we have found, we know that we are on the right path. However, if we find that our principle is contradicted by other clear teachings in the New Testament, then we know that we need to go back and work again. In order to do this step, we need to look back and forth between the timeless truth we have discovered in our text and the rest of the Bible. What other parts of Scripture agree with our principle? Are there any parts which disagree? Are there any that are unclear. Before we move on to step five to consider how we can explain and apply our timeless truth, we want to be sure that what we are teaching is accurate and consistent with the whole of God’s Word.

Let’s consider two examples for this step. First, we can consider the example from John 13 that we have been discussing. At the end of step three we stated our timeless truth in this way: “Jesus calls his disciples to follow his example by imitating his humble attitude and his servant actions.” To check this principle, we want to look for other passages in the New Testament that speak about that attitude and actions of Jesus and what is expected for his followers.

ASK: Can you think of any verses which teach about these things?

Here are a few samples:

- Mark 10:43 “But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant.”
- Mark 10:45 “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”
- Philippians 2:3-7 “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant. . .”

Looking at these verses together, we can conclude that our timeless truth agrees with the New Testament because we see several places that clearly show us the both the humility of Christ and the call for Christians to imitate him.

Now let’s consider a very different example.

A group of pastors were discussing what happens when people die. One of the pastors quoted from 1 Peter 3:19 which says that after he died, Jesus “went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison (after their deaths).” He claimed that this verse means that Jesus gave a chance to those who had already died to

repent and be saved, so today we can believe that people who have died will also have another opportunity to be saved. Is this a correct interpretation of this verse?

To answer that question, we need to consider other verses that teach about what happens at the end of our lives. We can find a very clear verse that teaches about this in Hebrews 9:27, “It is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment.” This verse is a simple, easy to understand statement that shows that judgement follows death, not another opportunity to repent and believe. When we compare this verse to 1 Peter 3:19, we can see that the verse in Hebrews is clear and direct while the verse in 1 Peter is not as certain. Because we know that God’s Word does not contradict itself, we must decide that the pastor has a wrong interpretation of 1 Peter 3:19. It cannot mean that Jesus gives people another chance to be saved. If we were studying this verse, we would need to go back and work through the Interpretive Journey again to try to understand this better.

Part 3 – Practice

For the last part of this lesson, lead the class to continue the work started at the end of the last lesson. We studied Mark 4:35-41, the story of Jesus calming the storm and the sea. First, do a quick review of what was learned from observing the text using Steps One and Two yesterday, then guide the class through Step Three and Step Four in the Interpretive Journey.

ASK: Who can summarize the information we learned about Mark 4:35-41 in our observations during the last lesson? What was God’s message in that text to the original audience?

Allow the students time to look up or review several important details and background pieces. Remind the students about the short, simple statement you wrote to summarize this step. In our example, we wrote: “In Mark 4:35-41, Jesus reveals to the disciples that he has power over all nature, and they begin to wonder who Jesus truly is.”

ASK: Let’s think again about the river between “our town” today and “their town” in Mark 4. What are some of the important differences we found between our languages, cultures, situations, and relationship to God?

Now move on to the steps we learned today.

- **Step Three – Cross the Bridge of Timeless Truth**

Instruct the students to think carefully about everything learned about this passage in the first two steps. Re-read the passage once or twice if necessary.

ASK: What are some details of Jesus’ message to the disciples and their situation that might not apply today? What are the most important parts of this text that still need to be believed and obeyed today?

Students may have several different thoughts on this. Try to help them see the difference between a temporary detail and a timeless truth. For example, Jesus was sleeping on a cushion in this story, but that does not mean he is sleeping when we need him today.

However, the disciples asked each other, “Who then is this, that even the wind and sea obey him?” Today, we must answer the same question, “Who do we believe that Jesus is?”

ASK: Now work together to write a short sentence using present tense verbs that communicates that timeless truth taught in this passage. Remember the guiding questions we introduced earlier.

1. Is this truth reflected clearly in the text?
2. Is this truth timeless and not tied to a specific situation?
3. Is this principle universal and not tied to a particular culture?
4. Does this principle agree with the teaching of the rest of the Bible?
5. Does this principle apply both the biblical audience in “their town” and today’s Christians in “our town?”

An example of timeless truth from Mark 4:35-41 might be:

“Jesus invites his disciples to answer the question, “Who is this man?” when we see that he has authority and power over all creation.”

- **Step Four – Consult the Biblical Map**

At this time, help the students to compare their timeless truth to other verses and passages in the New Testament to see whether there are any problems with their interpretation.

ASK: What other verses in the New Testament can support or contradict the timeless truth we have discovered in this passage?

Using the example statement from verse three, we might consider Mark 8:29 (Jesus asks the disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” or Colossians 1:16-17 (“all things were created through him and for him, and he is before all things, and in him all things hold together”). Both of these verses support the statement that Jesus has power over all creation and that he invites disciples to answer the question, “Who is this man?”

ASK: Based on these other verses you have suggested, does the timeless truth we discovered in this passage agree with the rest of God’s Word?

Interpreting the New Testament

Lesson 4

Introduction

In the last two lessons, we have been learning the Interpretive Journey, a five-step process that guides through the task of studying and correctly interpreting the meaning of any passage of Scripture in the New Testament. The first two steps taught us to observe everything happening in the text we are studying and to understand the message God was speaking to the original audience. The next two steps focused on learning to correctly interpret that text to discover the timeless truth that God's Word reveals not only to the original audience, but to all Christians in all times and places. In this lesson, we will explore the final step, "Grasp the Text in Our Town." This step teaches us to apply the biblical principles we have learned in the Interpretive Journey so that we can clearly teach people in our own churches how to understand and obey all that God is revealing in our passage. After we have finished learning the final step of the Interpretive Journey, the last part of this lesson will include some practical teaching to help us avoid common mistakes that people make when studying and interpreting Scripture.

Part 1 – Quick Review

Before we move deeper into our study of Steps Three and Four, take a few minutes to review the basics of the Interpretive Journey with the students. Point to the different numbers (1-5) on the picture in Lesson Two. Ask the students to name the five steps and the key question that needs to be answered with each step. Remind the students to memorize the picture, the steps, and the key questions. This will be part of their final exam for this course.

ASK

What are the five steps in the Interpretive Journey? And what is the key question for each step?

- Step 1: Grasp the text in their town.
 - Key Question: What did the text mean to the original audience?
 - ASK: What do we mean when we say, "their town?"
- Step 2: Measure the width of the river to cross.
 - Key Question: What are the differences between the biblical audience and us?
 - ASK: What does the river represent in our picture?
- Step 3: Cross the bridge of timeless truth.
 - Key Question: What is the unchanging truth that God reveals in this text?
 - ASK: What are some questions we should ask ourselves to see if the biblical principle we have learned in our study is a timeless truth?
- Step 4: Consult the biblical map.
 - Key Question: How does our timeless truth fit with the rest of the Bible?

- How will we know if our timeless truth is consistent with the rest of God’s Word? What can we do to check?
- Step 5: Grasp the text in our town.
 - Key Question: How should individual Christians and churches today live out the timeless truth?

Part 2 – Application in the Interpretive Journey

The first two steps of the Interpretive Journey taught us to *observe* the text we are studying. We wanted to notice every detail and understand what was happening, why it was happening, and what God was communicating in that passage. These steps require us to take our time and understand as much as possible about the text we are reading.

The next two steps of the Interpretive journey helped us to *interpret* the meaning of what we have just observed. The task of interpretation is not something that we can expect someone else to tell us directly. If we are to grow in our knowledge of God’s Word, and if we want to teach the people in our churches and communities, we need to learn the skill of correctly interpreting what we read in Scripture.

The final step is the one that most people think about when they want to study and teach the Bible. Step Five is when take the timeless truth that we learned through careful study in the first four steps and apply it to the lives of individual Christians and churches in our communities today.

- **Step Five – Grasp the Text in Our Town**

“Let’s all go around the circle and everybody say what this Bible verse means to you.”

Have you ever been part of a Bible study where you heard something like this statement above? It is a very common method today in many church and Bible study groups. People like this because it encourages everyone to participate and usually produces some very creative responses (some of which might sound very spiritual). But do you see the problem with this method of Bible study? Hopefully by now you can see that this approach often jumps over the first four steps in the Interpretive Journey and goes straight to application. We want to talk about what a Bible verse promises me or tells me to do today, but we do not stop to consider what God was speaking to the original audience or how our lives and situations compare to theirs. The result is that we hear all kinds of different “interpretations,” and many of them may have very little to do with the real meaning of the verses you are studying.

But we are learning a better way. We have been trained to observe everything happening in the passage we are studying so that we can understand what God was teaching people in the Bible. We know how to interpret their lessons and discover the unchanging biblical truths that need to be taught today. And now we are ready to think about how to carry those truths to “our town.” We want to apply God’s message to our own lives and the lives of our Christian brothers and sisters within our churches. The question we are facing now is this: how do we apply the timeless truths that we discovered in a way that people can understand and obey what God has revealed to us?

This is the place where we think about exactly how we connect our timeless truth to our lives and the lives of others. To help us with application, we will consider five guiding questions.

1. According to this biblical principle, what must we believe?

The first question causes us to think about our true beliefs. What have believed about God, about Jesus, about the Holy Spirit, about ourselves, or about others? Many times God's Word will correct wrong beliefs that we hold before we start changing the things that we do.

Look again at the passage we have been studying in John 13. What do we learn about Jesus in these verses? In verses 13 and 14, he says that he is our "Lord" and "Teacher." In verse 16, we learn that he is our "master." Perhaps you like to think of Jesus as your Savior or your Friend, but you rarely consider that he is the Sovereign Lord and King. Do you truly believe that Jesus is Lord, Teacher, and Master of your life? If we truly believe that, it will affect our whole life. Believing that Jesus is Lord, Teacher, and Master must mean that we are bound to trust and obey everything that he commands us, even if we don't understand or if we want to do something different. This first question invites us to consider if our beliefs need to change before our behavior.

2. According to this biblical principle, what must we do?

This is the question that most people think about first. What does God want me to do? Many times the passage that we are studying will include some very clear and practical instructions that we must obey. Pray this way. Worship this way. Fast at this time. Teach these things. Stop doing this sin. These can be some of the easiest applications for us to find in a passage.

- *Here is a hint to consider when you are thinking about this question.* You can be more specific in your application by asking, "According to this biblical principle, what must we do that some people might not want to do?" This will help you find the place where our hearts are not ready to obey God's Word.
- *Consider this example.* Imagine that you have been invited to speak to a gathering of men, and they have asked you to teach about the Christian family using Colossians 3:18-20. These verses include instructions for wives, for husbands, and for children. Since you are speaking to a group of men, they might be very happy to preach loudly about the command for wives to submit to their husbands and for children to obey their parents. But the instruction they are more likely to struggle to accept is the one which says, "Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them." Preaching to men about wives and children is easy. But the truth that needs to be applied to this group is the instruction that affects their own lives.

3. How can we begin to obey this principle in our lives?

This question helps us to think about ways obey what we learned from the first two questions. The biblical principle we have learned might instruct us to change our beliefs or to do something we have not been doing, but how should we do these

things? What do we do if God's Word is calling us to believe something that we have never even considered before? How do we begin to obey a command that we never knew about until this moment? These are the questions we must consider, and we must develop practical steps that can help us to obey everything we have learned.

4. How does this principle apply to the different relationships in our lives?

Our beliefs can be corrected through prayer with careful instruction and study in God's Word. Our habits and behavior can be changed with perseverance and practical guidance from a wise teacher. But we should also think about how a biblical principle can change our relationships with others. As you think about the timeless truth you have discovered in a passage of Scripture, ask yourself, "How does this truth change my relationships. . .

- with God?
- with my spouse?
- with my children?
- with other Christians in my church?
- with my neighbors who are not Christians?
- with my boss?
- with the people who work under me?
- with my government or other authorities?

5. What would happen if everyone in our church believed and obeyed this biblical principle?

This final question is an opportunity to imagine something good and share an encouraging vision with those you are teaching. Imagine that everyone in your church understood the principle you are teaching and began to obey it perfectly. How would things be different? Are there problems or disagreements in the church family that would be resolved? Are there marriages that would be restored? Are there broken friendships that would be reconciled? How would this affect the ministry or the reputation of your church in its community? Try to imagine these things and then describe what is possible as you are teaching. This can be a very positive way to motivate people to accept the Bible's truth and try to obey it in their own lives.

Remember when you are working on Step Five that you will not use every application question every time you teach. Pick two or three application that you think are the most important or helpful to those you are teaching. You might find ten great ways to apply the timeless truth from a passage to a group you are teaching, but most people will not be able to remember or obey that many things.

Part 3 – Practice

Go back to the passage we have been studying together in this course, Mark 4:35-41. Begin by quickly reviewing the first four steps that the group has practiced together. Then lead them through the application questions found in the previous section.

ASK: (Step One) Who can summarize the information we learned about Mark 4:35-41 in our observations during the last lesson? What was God's message in that text to the original

audience?

Allow the students time to look up or review several important details and background pieces. Remind the students about the short, simple statement you wrote to summarize this step. In our example, we wrote: “In Mark 4:35-41, Jesus reveals to the disciples that he has power over all nature, and they begin to wonder who Jesus truly is.”

ASK: (Step Two) Let’s think again about the river between “our town” today and “their town” in Mark 4. What are some of the important differences we found between our languages, cultures, situations, and relationship to God?

ASK: What are some details of Jesus’ message to the disciples and their situation that might not apply today? What are the most important parts of this text that still need to be believed and obeyed today?

Students may have several different thoughts on this. Try to help them see the difference between a temporary detail and a timeless truth. For example, Jesus was sleeping on a cushion in this story, but that does not mean he is sleeping when we need him today. However, the disciples asked each other, “Who then is this, that even the wind and sea obey him?” Today, we must answer the same question, “Who do we believe that Jesus is?”

ASK: (Step Three) After studying what God truth was revealing in “their town” and considering how “our town” is different from theirs, what was the timeless truth that we discovered from examining this passage?

An example of timeless truth from Mark 4:35-41 might be:

“Jesus invites his disciples to answer the question, “Who is this man?” when we see that he has authority and power over all creation.”

ASK: (Step Four) What other verses in the New Testament can support or contradict the timeless truth we have discovered in this passage?

Using the example statement from verse three, we might consider Mark 8:29 (Jesus asks the disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” or Colossians 1:16-17 (“all things were created through him and for him, and he is before all things, and in him all things hold together”). Both of these verses support the statement that Jesus has power over all creation and that he invites disciples to answer the question, “Who is this man?”

- **Step Five – Grasp the Text in Our Town**

Now that we have identified the timeless truth in Mark 4:35-41 and agreed that this principle agrees with the rest of the message of the New Testament, we are ready to apply the principle in “our town.” Work through the five guiding questions one at a time and think carefully about how the timeless truth should affect our lives today. (For the purposes of these notes, we will follow the example timeless truth stated above. If your class identified a different timeless truth, use their statement as you lead them through the questions.)

Example Timeless Truth: *“Jesus invites his disciples to answer the question, “Who is this man?” when we see that he has authority and power over all creation.”*

ASK: According to this biblical principle, what must we believe?

ASK: According to this biblical principle, what must we do?

ASK: How can we begin to obey this biblical principle?

ASK: How does this biblical principle apply to the different relationships in our lives?

ASK: What would happen if everyone in our church believed and obeyed this biblical principle?

Take note of each of the practical applications that the students suggest as you work through these questions. Help them keep their applications tied closely to the text we are studying and the timeless truth we have stated. If someone suggests an application that does not connect to our text or timeless truth, offer a gentle correction to guide them back. For example, imagine you are asking the question, “According to this biblical principle, what must we do?” How would you respond if a student answers, “We should love God?” It is true that we should always love God, but that is not what this passage is teaching. When students suggest an application that is not directly connected to the timeless truth, we need to help them see the mistake so that they can understand and avoid repeating it in the future.

ASK: Look at all the suggested applications that we have found for teaching this timeless truth to people in “our town.” If you were teaching a Bible study on this passage, which applications would you include in your lesson? Choose two or three and explain why you would want to include them.

Part 4 – Common Mistakes in Bible Interpretation

The final part of this lesson explains a few of the most common mistakes people make when studying the Bible. These can be covered quickly or cut from the lesson if time is short. Explain to the students that these are not listed to criticize or embarrass anyone. It is possible your students have made one or more of the mistakes below in their own Bible study. This list is given to help them improve their own biblical interpretation and to help them recognize if they are hearing an interpretation that is obviously not correct.

- The “Obvious Meaning” Mistake – This is the mistake we make when we assume that the meaning of a text is obvious and easy without realizing the background information that would help us see the meaning more clearly. Sometimes we think that we immediately know what a verse means, but when we take the time to study carefully, we will find that it means something very different. Once there was a young Christian man who read Jesus’ words in Luke 10:4, “Carry no moneybag, no knapsack, no sandals, and greet no one on the road,” and he decided to obey them exactly. He jumped on the back of the truck and road to a large city with no money and no clothes. Five days later he was freezing cold, dirty, and hungry when he finally convinced a stranger to allow him to borrow his phone. He called his pastor back home and asked for someone to come and rescue him. We can appreciate this young man’s zeal to obey Jesus, but it would have been better if he knew how to interpret his Bible well.
- The “Spiritual” Mistake – This is the mistake we make when we try to assign a special spiritual meaning to every detail in a biblical story. This is especially common when people read the parables that Jesus or the stories from his life. One preacher

proclaimed that the two small coins that the widow gave in Luke 21:2 were symbols for her prayers that God would give her health and a husband. That sounds very spiritual, but it is not the meaning of that verse. In the very next verse, Jesus tells us that two coins are all of her worldly wealth, and he teaches that she has acted in great faith by giving all that she has to God. We must be careful not to add extra meaning to a Bible verse to make it appear more spiritual than it is.

- The “Ignore It” Mistake – This mistake happens when we find a passage that is difficult to understand and decide to ignore it and find an easier verse to study. This might make us feel better for a moment, but we rob ourselves of the treasures in God’s Word if we refuse to work hard to study and interpret all that He has given us.
- The “My Opinion” Mistake – This mistake occurs when people assume that any creative or interesting thought they have about a verse or passage must be right. It is very common to see this in a situation such as the one described above when a Bible study leader says, “Let’s read this verse and everyone say what you think it means.” People may give answers that come from their feelings or their past experiences or what they heard another teacher say once. But none of these come from actually studying what a verse means in truth. Sometimes people will use spiritual language to share their opinions by saying, “I think the Holy Spirit is showing me that this means...” or “All of us have the Holy Spirit, so each of us have something to say.” These things might make someone sound very spiritual, but it does not mean they have learned the truth that God is teaching in a verse or passage.
- The “Touch Not the Lord’s Anointed” Mistake – This is the most dangerous mistake on this list. It happens when someone who believes that they are a “man of God” or “Anointed” or some other highly spiritual title teaches that his interpretation of a Bible verse must be correct because God has revealed the truth to him and no one else. This is a form of manipulation and almost always leads to false teaching. If you find someone claiming that God has given them a special vision or revelation of the Bible’s meaning, you should leave that person immediately.

Interpreting the New Testament

Lesson 5

Introduction

This final lesson is set aside to review all the information that has been learned so far in the course and to provide some extra practice to students before the final exam and project. As you lead this lesson, allow students to answer questions and encourage them to explain their answers as completely as they are able. Listen carefully to hear any misunderstandings so that you can offer a gentle correction when it is needed. At the end of this lesson, explain to the students exactly what they should expect for the final exam and project so that they can be prepared.

Part 1 – Review

ASK: What are seven reasons that it is important to study and interpret the Bible accurately?

1. God's Word is completely true and useful for all that we need to live as Christians. (2 Tim. 3:16)
2. There are treasure of truth and wisdom to be found by looking deeply into Scripture. (Ps. 119:18)
3. God has given leaders to his Church to train all the believers in truth and to build them up into unity in Christ. (Eph. 4:11-13)
4. We are called to work hard as teachers of God's Word so that we will not be ashamed when we stand before him. (2 Tim. 2:15)
5. We are commanded to proclaim the truth of God's Word and to teach correct doctrine, even in times when we are surrounded by different kinds of false teaching. (2 Tim. 4:2-3)
6. Some of the truths we find in the Bible are not easy to understand, and they require us to work hard to understand them clearly. (2 Pet. 3:15-16)
7. The truth of God's Word never changes, and those of us who teach it must be careful to teach everything God has commanded faithfully. (Matt. 5:19; James 3:1)

ASK: What are the four major kinds – or genres – of writing in the New Testament that we discussed? Explain one thing we need to remember when reading each one.

- The stories of the New Testament.
- The teachings of Jesus.
- The letters in the New Testament.
- The book of Revelation.

ASK: What are some things that we need to remember when interpreting each of the different genres of writing found in the New Testament? (Check notes from Lesson One if they don't remember.)

ASK: What are the five steps of the Interpretive Journey? What is the Key Question that goes with each step?

- Step One – Grasp the text in their town.
 - Key Question – What did the text mean to the original audience?
- Step Two – Measure the width of the river to cross.
 - Key Question – What are the differences between the biblical audience and us?
- Step Three – Cross the Bridge of Timeless Truth
 - Key Question – What is the unchanging biblical principle in this passage?
- Step Four – Consult the biblical map.
 - Key Question – How does our timeless truth fit with the rest of the Bible?
- Step Five – Grasp the text in our town.
 - Key Question – How should individual Christians and churches live out the timeless truth in this passage?

ASK: Explain what each step means as much as you can. What do we do for each step. What should we know when we have completed that step? What questions can we ask to help our study during each step in the process?

Part 2 – Interpretive Journey Practice

Explain to the students that part of their final exam will require them to work as a group to study a passage from the New Testament following the steps of the Interpretive Journey. Using the remaining time in this lesson, select one or more of the passages listed below for the students to practice. Instruct them to talk through all five steps of the Interpretive Journey together. They should write down the following notes to show the work they have done:

1. (For Step 1) Write a short, simple statement to summarize the message that God was revealing to the original audience.
2. (For Step 3) Write the timeless truth (or truths) that you discovered from studying this passage.
3. (For Step 5) Write two or three specific applications of your timeless truth that you would teach to others in your church.

Passages for Interpretive Journey Group Practice:

- The stories of the New Testament – Mark 9:2-13
- The teachings of Jesus – John 12:20-26
- The letters of the New Testament – 2 Timothy 4:1-5
- The book of Revelation – Revelation 7:9-12 (Note: Only assign this for practice if you have time to study it slowly while giving them much help and explanation.)

Part 3 – Final Exam Preview

Explain to the students what will be required for their final exam. The exam includes two parts.

The first part is a written exam. Each student will take the written exam individually. A score of 50% is needed to pass.

Students will see the picture of the Interpretive Journey found in Lesson Two. They will be required to write each of the five steps in order and the key question which goes along with them.

Students will also see multiple choice questions about other information studied in this course. They will need to remember the 7 reasons we need to interpret the Bible accurately, the four different kinds of writing in the New Testament, and the steps for the Interpretive Journey.

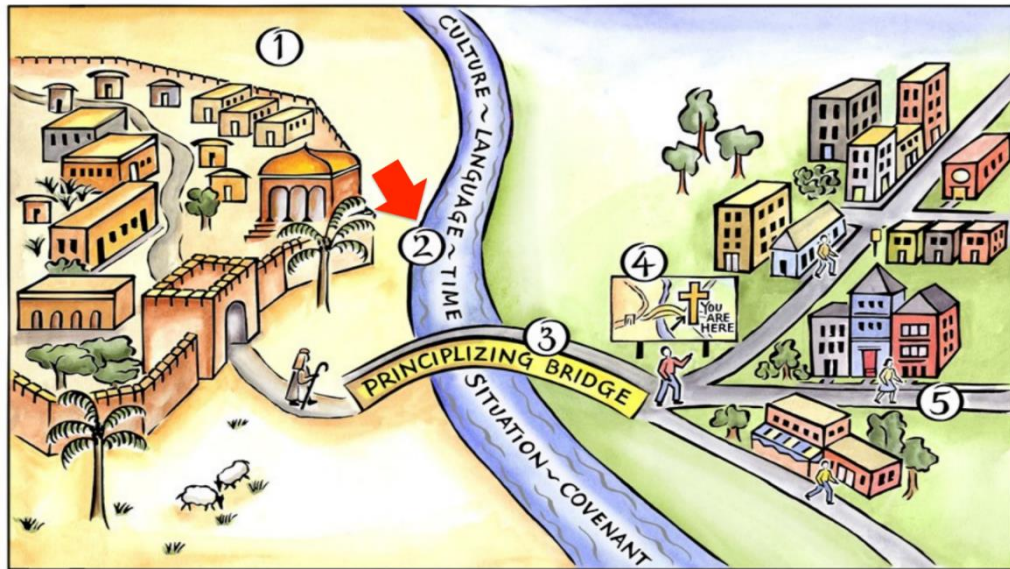
The second part of the exam is a group project. The group will work together for 30-45 minutes to follow the steps of the Interpretive Journey to the best of their ability. You will assign them a specific passage from the New Testament to study and interpret. They can talk, use their Bibles and study Bibles, or use their class notes to complete the study. Smart phones and computers should not be allowed. The instructor will observe how well the group follows the five steps and assign a grade of “Pass” or “Fail.”

Each student must pass both the written exam and the group project to complete this course successfully.

Interpreting the New Testament

Final Exam

Write the five steps of the Interpretive Journey and the key question which must be answered with each step.



1. Step One -
Key Question –
2. Step Two -
Key Question
3. Step Three -
Key Question -
4. Step Four -
Key Question -
5. Step Five -
Key Question –

6. Circle all seven reasons that it is important to study and interpret the Bible accurately. (7 points)
- a. God's Word is completely true and useful for all that we need to live as Christians.
 - b. The Bible is a holy book that contains the answers to solve all of your problems.
 - c. There are treasures of truth and wisdom to be found by looking deeply into Scripture.
 - d. God has given leaders to his Church to train all the believers in truth and to build them up into unity in Christ.
 - e. We are called to work hard as teachers of God's Word so that we will not be ashamed when we stand before him.
 - f. The Bible has a spiritual power that protects us from evil spirits.
 - g. We are commanded to proclaim the truth of God's Word and to teach correct doctrine, even in times when we are surrounded by different kinds of false teaching.
 - h. Some of the truths we find in the Bible are not easy to understand, and they require us to work hard to understand them clearly.
 - i. Only those who have received special training can study and teach the Bible.
 - j. The truth of God's Word never changes, and those of us who teach it must be careful to teach everything God has commanded faithfully.
7. Which genre of New Testament writing contains messages written by Paul to different churches and individuals?
- a. Teachings of Jesus
 - b. The Book of Revelation
 - c. New Testament Letters
8. Mark 4:35-41, Jesus calming the wind and sea, is an example of what kind of New Testament writing?
- a. Stories of the New Testament
 - b. Teachings of Jesus
 - c. The Book of Revelation
9. Which New Testament genre is full of symbolism and apocalyptic writing?
- a. Stories of the New Testament
 - b. New Testament Letters
 - c. The Book of Revelation

Interpreting the New Testament Final Exam – MASTER COPY

Correct answers are in **bold letters**. Each correct answer is worth one point. This exam is worth a total of 20 points.

Write the five steps of the Interpretive Journey and the key question which must be answered with each step.



1. Step One – **Grasp the text in their town. (1 point)**
Key Question – **What did the text mean to the original audience? (1 point)**
2. Step Two – **Measure the width of the river to cross. (1 point)**
Key Question – **What are the differences between the biblical audience and us? (1 point)**
3. Step Three – **Cross the bridge of timeless truth. (1 point)**
Key Question – **What is the unchanging biblical principle in this passage? (1 point)**
4. Step Four – **Consult the biblical map. (1 point)**
Key Question – **How does our timeless truth fit with the rest of the Bible? (1 point)**
5. Step Five – **Grasp the text in our town. (1 point)**
Key Question – **How should individual Christians and churches live out the timeless truth in this passage? (1 point)**

6. Circle all seven reasons that it is important to study and interpret the Bible accurately. (7 points)
- a. **God's Word is completely true and useful for all that we need to live as Christians.**
 - b. The Bible is a holy book that contains the answers to solve all of your problems.
 - c. **There are treasures of truth and wisdom to be found by looking deeply into Scripture.**
 - d. **God has given leaders to his Church to train all the believers in truth and to build them up into unity in Christ.**
 - e. **We are called to work hard as teachers of God's Word so that we will not be ashamed when we stand before him.**
 - f. The Bible has a spiritual power that protects us from evil spirits.
 - g. **We are commanded to proclaim the truth of God's Word and to teach correct doctrine, even in times when we are surrounded by different kinds of false teaching.**
 - h. **Some of the truths we find in the Bible are not easy to understand, and they require us to work hard to understand them clearly.**
 - i. Only those who have received special training can study and teach the Bible.
 - j. **The truth of God's Word never changes, and those of us who teach it must be careful to teach everything God has commanded faithfully.**
7. Which genre of New Testament writing contains messages written by Paul to different churches and individuals?
- a. Teachings of Jesus
 - b. The Book of Revelation
 - c. **New Testament Letters (1 point)**
8. Mark 4:35-41, Jesus calming the wind and sea, is an example of what kind of New Testament writing?
- a. **Stories of the New Testament (1 point)**
 - b. Teachings of Jesus
 - c. The Book of Revelation
9. Which New Testament genre is full of symbolism and apocalyptic writing?
- a. Stories of the New Testament
 - b. New Testament Letters
 - c. **The Book of Revelation (1 point)**

Interpreting the New Testament

Group Project

For this part of the final exam students must work as a group to study a passage from the New Testament following the steps of the Interpretive Journey. Select one of the passages listed below for the student project. Instruct them to talk through all five steps of the Interpretive Journey together. The group should be allowed 30-45 minutes to complete this study. They should write down the following notes to show the work they have done:

- (Step One) Write a short, simple statement to summarize the message that God was revealing to the original audience.
- (Step Three) Write the timeless truth (or truths) that you discovered from studying this passage.
- (Step Five) Write two or three specific applications of your timeless truth that you would teach to others in your church.

Passages for Interpretive Journey Group Project:

- The stories of the New Testament – Matthew 9:1-7
- The teachings of Jesus – Matthew 6:7-14
- The letters of the New Testament – 2 Timothy 4:1-5

How to grade the group project:

After giving the students full instructions, watch them closely for the entire time of the project. Try to give as little help as possible; encourage them to follow the steps of the Interpretive Journey as they have learned. You should be able to see that the group has learned all five steps of the Interpretive Journey, the key questions for each step, and how to complete each step in the process. They are free to use their Bibles and any notes they have, but no cell phones or computers are allowed. The group should submit the statements they have written for steps 1, 3, and 5 as noted above.

The group will be graded as a whole with either a ‘pass’ or ‘fail.’ If you see that everyone in the group has learned the steps, understands how to follow the Interpretive Journey process, and shows some ability to interpret the passage in a faithful and accurate way, then award them a grade of ‘pass’ for their work on this project.