



Interpreting the Old Testament

Teaching Notes

Dr. Nathan H. Gunter

Lusaka

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 Old Testament and explain how each one needs to be considered when studying the Bible.

Part 1 – Definition and Importance of Bible Interpretation

Consider this. A few years ago a group of African pastors and leaders attended a teaching conference in northern Zambia with some seminary professors. One of the professors quoted Hebrews 1:1-2, which says, "Long ago, at many times and in many different ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son..." He went on to explain that we hear God speak to us through the words of Jesus and his apostles that are recorded for us in the Bible. According to this verse, God does not send prophets with new messages today like he did during the days of the Old Testament.

Several of the pastors and leaders were upset to hear this, because they lived in a place where people were always looking for prophets and seers to give them a message from God. One church elder who was sitting in the back could not hold in his words any longer. He stood up and said, "But if we do not go to the prophets, how will ever know what God will say to us anymore!?"

Do you see the problem in this situation? This was a room full of pastors and leaders, they were men and women who were trusted by churches in their community to be wise and faithful spiritual leaders. Yet most of them did not understand that the Bible we have is the actual Word of God which is "living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword" (Hebrews 4:12). In the Bible, God has given us, "all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence" (2 Peter 1:3). Many people today desire to hear from God through some other person – a prophet, a seer, a man of God, or some other spiritual leader – but God has given each one of us his Holy Spirit, and he has revealed himself in the Bible in a way that each one of us can understand and know him personally.

This is the reason that learning to study and interpret the Bible is so important. If God is speaking through his Word, then we must learn to listen. If you are to be a faithful and trustworthy leader in your church, then you must "Do your best to present yourself as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15).

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 Old Testament

Did you know that the Old 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 Old 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:

- History (or Narrative Stories) in Old Testament
- Old Testament Law
- Wisdom and Writings (or Poetry)
- Old Testament Prophets.

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

- History (or Narrative Stories) in the Old Testament

History (stories told by the author or narrator) sections are a theological history. Similar to the book of Acts in the New Testament, these are not written to keep a record a simple record of everything that happened in Old Testament times. They record the history of God’s work in the world, and especially among his covenant people. 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)

The history books of the Old Testament begin in Genesis and go all the way to Esther. Within some of these books we also find other genres mixed into the history. For example, much of Exodus through Deuteronomy is Old Testament Law, a genre that we will explain in just a moment. We also find examples of poetry and other writings added into historical books occasionally.

Here are a few important things to remember when reading the books of History in the Old Testament:

1. The meaning of a passage is found primarily from studying the actions of the characters in the story. We can see this in Genesis 15 when God makes a covenant with Abraham. Many details are included in the story that teach us about God and how he relates to us. However, the most important point of the story is found in Abraham's reaction. Genesis 15:6 says, "And Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness."
2. Not all of the characters are "good examples." (Note also: not all characters are completely good or completely bad.) This is another way of saying that not everything that is recorded in the Old Testament is also *recommended* for us to copy.

Consider the life of Saul, the first king of Israel (recorded in 1 Samuel). He did many good things, including defeating the Philistines in battle and building an altar to worship the Lord. However, Saul also offered sacrifices to God by himself instead of waiting for a priest, made foolish vows, disobeyed God's command to destroy all of the Amalekites, and blamed the people of Israel for his mistakes instead of taking responsibility. Saul is not a good example of a righteous king or a good leader, but we can still learn much from reading about his life.

3. God is often the central character or focus of each story. A critical question is always, "What does this story reveal about the character of God and the way He relates to people?"

Example: In Exodus 3, God calls out to Moses from burning bush. In this story alone, we learn that God is holy, that God calls out to people even when we are not searching for him, and God promises to be with us when he gives us a command to serve him.

4. We also want to notice different writing while studying the books of history, including: Plot, setting, characters, viewpoint of the narrator, comparison/contrast, irony.

- Old Testament Law

The Old Testament includes 613 distinct laws given by God to Moses to guide the lives and worship of Israel. The people of Israel were committed to carefully obeying each one of these as part of their covenant of worship and obedience to the Lord.

These Laws governed relationships between people, moral behavior, business deals, sacrifices and offerings, religious feasts and celebrations, and touched almost every other part of daily life.

Old Testament Law is found in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

Here are a few explanations of the traditional distinctions between different kinds of Laws found in the Old Testament and tips for accurate interpretation.

Things to remember when reading the Old Testament Law:

1. The Old Testament includes 3 Types of Laws.
 - Moral Law – These are laws concerning holy living before God and right behavior. They come from God’s own holy nature and include the Ten Commandments. These laws still teach us how to live and behave in a moral and righteous way before God. Because God’s holy character never changes, the laws which teach holy living never cease to apply. Within the Ten Commandments, we see examples of moral laws, such as “Do not murder; do not steal; do not commit adultery; do not covet your neighbor’s possessions.”
 - Civil Law – These laws were given to govern and establish a culture of justice within the OT nation of Israel. Examples include laws concerning everything from murder and manslaughter to helping your neighbor if his donkey falls in a well. These laws guided the government and civil society of Israel in the New Testament, but they are not laws for Christians and churches today.
 - Ceremonial Law – Ceremonial laws focus on the Hebrew life of worship as God’s covenant people. They include specific instructions for constructing the tabernacle, sacrifices and offerings, holy feasts, and laws about cleanness and uncleanness, and rules that distinguish the Israelites as holy people compared to their neighbors (Sabbath, fasting, diet, clothing). These laws guided the worship and sacrifices of the people of Israel in the tabernacle and in the temple under the old covenant. However, as we will see in the next point, Christians do not live under the laws of the old covenant today.
2. The Mosaic Law is no longer a functioning covenant (Hebrews 8:6-13). When Jesus came to earth, he lived a life that was perfect and holy, and he completely fulfilled all of the requirements of the Old Testament laws and covenant. Through his death on the cross, he established a new covenant between God and mankind, and this guides our relationship with God today.
3. All of the Law is good and beneficial to us (2 Tim. 3:16-17; Psalm 19:7; Psalm 119:65-68). While the Old Testament Law does not direct all of our daily activities and worship as it did for the people of Israel, we still benefit greatly from reading and studying it. The Laws teach us about God’s holiness, his justice, and his mercy so that we can know God in truth and learn to trust and

obey him.

4. We interpret the OT law through the filter of NT teaching. This means that we often see the New Testament giving us a clearer and more complete explanation of what Old Testament Laws mean for us. For example, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus helped his disciples (and us) to understand that the Old Testament laws against murder and lust were not only about our actions, but the attitudes in our hearts. In the Old Testament, we read, “Do not murder” and “Do not commit adultery,” but Jesus tells us that hating our brother or lusting after a woman in our hearts is also a violation of God’s law. So the New Testament helps us to understand what the OT law really means.

- Wisdom and Writings (or Poetry)

The middle section of the Old Testament – from Job through Song of Solomon – includes books classified as Wisdom and Writings. These are often referred to as the ‘Writings’ in books about the Old Testament today. This genre is very different from the straightforward narrative style associated with the books of Law and History.

Below are a few of the key features and functions of this genre that need to be understood in order to interpret their meaning well.

Things to remember when reading the Wisdom and Writings:

1. Shortness of words. Wisdom and Writings passages do not write out stories in long form. Instead, they use a minimum number of words to communicate a maximum amount of truth.
2. Unique writing characteristics. Because the Old Testament was originally written in the Hebrew language, some of the special features of its poems are hard for us to read in English or other languages. Here are two examples.
 - Parallelism – Almost all Hebrew poetry uses parallelism. This means that most sentences include two lines that have a special relationship to one another. We can see this in Job 25:4, “How then can man be in the right before God? How can he who is born of woman be pure?” Notice how the two sentences are closely related to each other to form one important thought. In this example, the two questions are really the same, but they are asked in different ways to emphasize the point that it is impossible for a man to make himself acceptable before a holy God.
 - Acrostics – An acrostic is a poem in which the first word of each line or verse begins with the same letter. The best example of this is Psalm 119. This Psalm is divided into sections that are 8 verses long. In each section, the first word of each verse begins with the same letter, and each section uses a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet. So verses 1-8 (section 1) all begin with the Hebrew letter *aleph*. Verse 9-16 (section 2) all begin with the Hebrew letter *beth*. This does not mean much to us, but it was a great way to help the people of Israel

remember these Psalms.

3. Figurative Image Language. Old Testament Wisdom and Writings use many different kinds of figurative images and language to communicate truth that is both powerful and beautiful.
 - Analogy – An analogy is any statement that compares to different ideas to show how they are similar or different in a figurative way. For example, Psalm 23:1 says, “The Lord is my shepherd,” and Psalm 18:2 says, “The Lord is my rock and my fortress...” We know that God is much more than just a shepherd, and he is certainly not an actual rock. But these verses use those pictures to help us understand and remember something important about who God is.
 - Wordplays: “For example, in Job 13:24, Job (*iyyob* [last mentioned in 12:1]) may be interpreting his name in the light of his experience when he accuses God of regarding him as an enemy (*oyyeb*.)” The two words sound similar in the Hebrew language, and when they are used closely in the same verses it would sound interesting and memorable to the people who heard it.

4. What is the Function or Purpose of different books in the Wisdom and Writings?
 - Psalms – Gives us Holy Spirit-inspired models of how to pray and worship God.
 - Proverbs – Explains the way to live wisely in normal times of life.
 - Job – Helps us to understand God’s perspective of suffering in the lives of the righteous and faithful.
 - Ecclesiastes – Helps us think clearly when the normal, orderly approach to life fails, and points us to the ultimate meaning to life.
 - Song of Solomon – Describes the irrationality of romantic love between a husband and wife.

- Old Testament Prophets

The last major portion of the Old Testament is the prophets, stretching from Isaiah to Malachi. These men of God fulfilled a unique role in the God’s history of salvation, speaking divinely inspired and authoritative messages to the people of Israel (and sometimes to their neighbors).

Understanding a few basic themes and guidelines will help to interpret the intended meaning more accurately.

Things to remember when reading the Old Testament Prophets:

1. The basic prophetic message. In all of the books of the prophets, the messages that God speaks to Israel can be summarized into three basic categories:
 - You have broken the covenant; therefore repent!
 - No repentance? Then judgment!

- However, there is still hope beyond the judgment for a glorious, future restoration.
2. 3 Charges Against Israel. Just as there are three basic messages found in the prophets, we also see three basic accusations that God brings against Israel when he calls them to repentance.
- Idolatry – This is worship or devotion to anything or anyone else besides God. Idolatry is worshiping something else instead of God, but it is also worshiping, serving, or honoring anything else *in addition* to God.
 - Oppressing Neighbors – Harming or taking advantage of the poor, orphans, widows, foreigners, or any other vulnerable person is a serious offense in the eyes of God.
 - Religious Ritualism – This is empty or meaningless prayers or worship. Israel often became cold and heartless in their relationship to God. They would sing songs, say prayers, and bring sacrifices to the temple, but they did not think about God or love him, and their normal lives were not changed in any way by their faith.
3. Remember the context. The Old Testament prophets spoke messages to the people of Israel living under the old covenant. The calls to repentance and the promises they proclaimed were intended for those people, and they may not apply to us directly. This is why we follow the five steps of Interpretive Journey carefully, so that we can separate the message intended for them from the messages that still apply to us today.
4. Questions to ask when reading the Old Testament prophets:
- What is the prophet's background?
 - Who is the prophet addressing?
 - For what is the nation being commended or rebuked?
 - What does the prophet promise as the consequence of the nation's behavior?
 - In what way is the nation commanded to change its behavior?
 - If it is a predictive prophecy, has it been fulfilled? If so, how?
 - Are there any secondary fulfillments?
 - How does this passage fit into the prophet's overall message?
 - What does this passage tell us about God's dealings with Israel?

Each of these four genres, or categories, of Old Testament writings reveals truth from God in slightly different ways. If we understand what to look for when reading History, Law, Prophets, or even the Psalms and Wisdom Writings, 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 Old Testament that we discussed? Explain one thing we need to remember when reading each one.

- History (or Narrative Stories) in the Old Testament
- Old Testament Law
- Wisdom and Writings (or Poetry)
- Old Testament Prophets

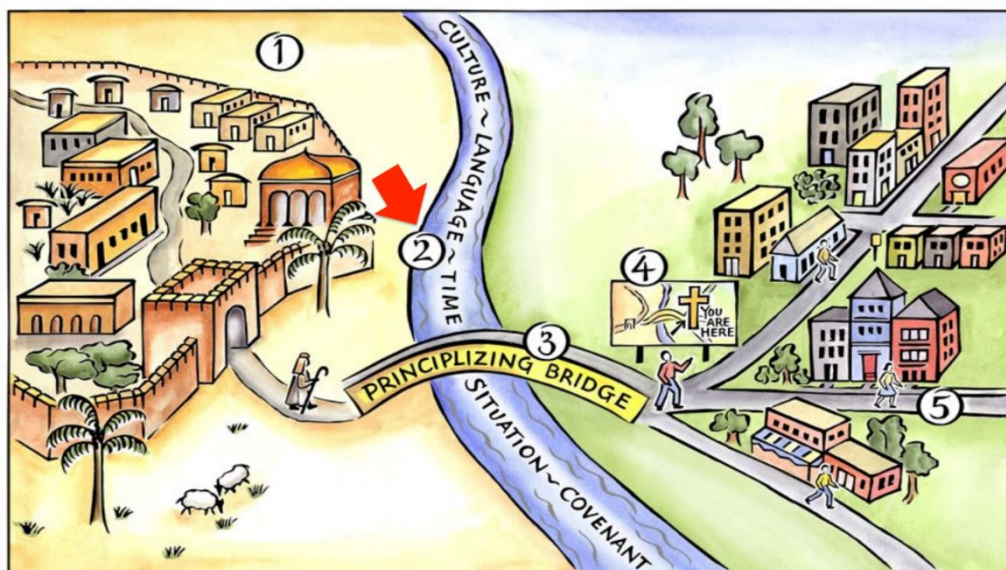
Lesson 2

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 Ten Commandments, “their town” refers to the desert around Mt. Sinai in the time of Moses. Our aim would be to discover what the people of Israel would have understood when they heard Moses explain the Ten Commandments to them. 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 Moses wrote. 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 Psalm 119:105, we read, “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” When the people of Israel read these words thousands of years ago, they understood what this verse is talking about. In those days, if someone had to walk at night while carrying a burden, they might have a small oil lamp tied around their ankle. The small lamp would light up the path just in front of the person so that they could see the ground for their next step. But we do not do this when we are walking at night anymore. Does that mean that this verse means nothing to us? Of course not! This verse is saying that God’s Word is like the lamps people used at night long ago, giving the reader enough light to know what step he should take next. The Word of God has not changed, and it helps us in the same way today. When we are struggling and not sure what God wants us to do, his word shines enough light to show us the next step we need to take.

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 Samuel 15:22, when the prophet Samuel declares, “Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams.” Today, we do not sacrifice rams and sheep as part of our worship of God. If you brought a ram to sacrifice at church next Sunday, everyone would be extremely confused. However, we can recognize a timeless truth that God is always more pleased when we listen to his word humbly and obey what he has said rather than trying to perform a great religious act that everyone else will notice.

- **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 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 Old 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 Old 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 Old 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 Old 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 an Old Testament survey class can be helpful.

Historical Context – Where does this passage fit in the history of the Old 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?
- When did this passage take place in the history of the Old Testament and Israel? Before the fall of mankind or after? Before the covenant with Abraham or after? Before the Law was given or after? Before the Exile or after?

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:

- Moses commanded the people of Israel to . . .
- Jeremiah encouraged the people of Israel when he declared that . . .

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: Almost the entire Old Testament was originally written in Hebrew.) 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 Old Testament was written over a period of more than 1000 years, and the most recently written part of the OT was written more than 2000 years before today. 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? Gentile nations? 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?
- Covenant or Relationship to God – This is a very, very important detail to remember when reading the Old Testament. Everything in the OT was written before the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. In other words, everything before Jesus was written as part of the old covenant. A covenant is a formal agreement or commitment to a relationship. When Jesus died on the cross, he opened the new covenant, which is the basis of our relationship with God today. But no one in the Old Testament knew about the crucifixion and resurrection of the Messiah, and their relationship with God was based on a completely different covenant than ours. Every time we read a passage in the Old Testament, we have to think about how the difference between their covenant with God and our covenant changes what it means to us today.

Part 3 – PRACTICE, God Rejects Saul as King

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 1 Samuel 15:17-23 (ESV)

And Samuel said, “Though you are little in your own eyes, are you not the head of the tribes of Israel? The Lord anointed you king over Israel. And the Lord sent you on a mission and said, ‘Go, devote to destruction the sinners, the Amalekites, and fight against them until

they are consumed.' Why then did you not obey the voice of the Lord? Why did you pounce on the spoil and do what was evil in the sight of the Lord?" And Saul said to Samuel, "I have obeyed the voice of the Lord. I have gone on the mission on which the Lord sent me. I have brought Agag the king of Amalek, and I have devoted the Amalekites to destruction. But the people took of the spoil, sheep and oxen, the best of the things devoted to destruction, to sacrifice to the Lord your God in Gilgal. And Samuel said,

"Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of divination, and presumption is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, he has also rejected you from being king."

- **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 in the early days of the nation of Israel. The time of the judges is past, and Saul is the first king of the nation.
- Where is it happening?
This event happens in the land of Israel, part of the promised land that God allowed the Israelites to conquer and settle as their own country after leading them out of Egypt.
- Who wrote this book?
The book of 1 Samuel does not claim an author, but Jews and Christians have taught that it was written by the prophet Samuel.
- Who is speaking?
The story includes speaking by both Samuel and Saul.
- Who is being spoken to?
Again, both Samuel and Saul are spoken to. The most important part of the passage is Samuel's message to Saul in verses 22-23.

- Exactly what is being said or taught? Be specific and note details and important words.

God gave Saul a clear mission to destroy the Amalekites and everything they owned. Saul obeyed most of the mission, defeating the Amalekites and killing almost all the people. But he kept the king alive and allowed the people to keep the best of the animals. When Samuel challenged Saul for not obeying everything the Lord had said, Saul first tried to argue that he had obeyed, then he blamed the people of Israel instead of taking responsibility as the king. Samuel responded by declaring that God is more pleased by faithful listening to his word and obedience than by sacrifices and offerings that come after sinful disobedience. Finally, Samuel announced that because of Saul's disobedience, God had rejected him as king.

- Is there any response from the audience? If so, what is it?
If we continue reading into verses 24 and beyond, we see that Saul admitted his sin, but even then he continued to blame others and help himself.
- What does the author or speaker expect the hearers to do in response?
The clearest message in these verses is Samuel's statement in the second part of verse 22: "Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat or rams." The message to readers is that God is looking for those who will faithfully listen to and obey his words.

Observing the Context

- Historical Context
 - Where does this passage fit in the history of the Old Testament?
This passage comes after the people of Israel have conquered the promise land and immediately after the time of the judges. Saul is the first anointed king of Israel.
 - What country or kingdom did this take place in?
This takes place in Israel.
 - Who was the king or ruler?
Saul is the king of Israel at this time.
 - 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 people of Israel were united as a single nation under a single king for the first time. They were mostly free, although neighboring tribes (such as the Amalekites in this story) continued to battle and cause problems for them at many times.
 - What is the covenant situation for the people of Israel at this time.
Israel was living under the Law of Moses as a nation at this time. Moses had received the Law at Mount Sinai, taught it to Israel for 40 years, and reminded them of the Law one final time before dying at the end of Deuteronomy. Then Joshua began to lead the nation, and he also reminded them of the Law that governed their

relationship with God and their lives as a nation. The old covenant and the Mosaic Law continued to direct the lives of Israel until the time of Jesus almost 1000 years later.

- Literary Context

- What is the genre – or kind of writing – you are studying in this passage?

This passage comes from the History (or Narrative Stories) books of the Old Testament.

- What happened or what is written immediately before and after the passage you are studying?

Immediately before, at the beginning of 1 Samuel 15:1-16, Samuel brings Saul a command and a mission to fight against and completely destroy the Amalekites. Saul led Israel to fight and defeat the Amalekites, but he did not completely obey all that the Lord had said. Immediately after, in 1 Samuel 15:24-34, Saul tries to admit his sin and save his kingship, but in his confession he is still blaming others for his disobedience and telling Samuel that the Lord is “your God” rather than “my God.” At the end of the chapter, Samuel himself kills the king of Amalek, then leaves Saul and never sees him again.

- What is the main theme of the book you are studying? How does this passage relate to that theme?

The greatest theme of 1 Samuel is God’s rejection of selfish and faithless leaders (such as Eli’s sons and Saul) as he raises up and works through those who are humble and faithful to him (such as Samuel and David). This passage is the key description of God rejecting Saul for his disobedience before raising up David to replace him.

- 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?

The book of 1 Samuel describes the transition from the final judge of Israel (Samuel) to Israel’s first king (Saul, who was rejected for disobedience) to the rise of the first faithful king of Israel (David). This passage is a very important teaching in the heart of the book that declares God’s preference for those who will honor and obey him.

Create a Short, Simple Statement

- Explain the most important truth that is taught in this passage.

Example: In 1 Samuel 15:17-23, God speaks through the prophet Samuel to reject Saul as king over Israel because of his disobedience and to declare that God is pleased by faithful obedience to his Word more than extravagant sacrifices.

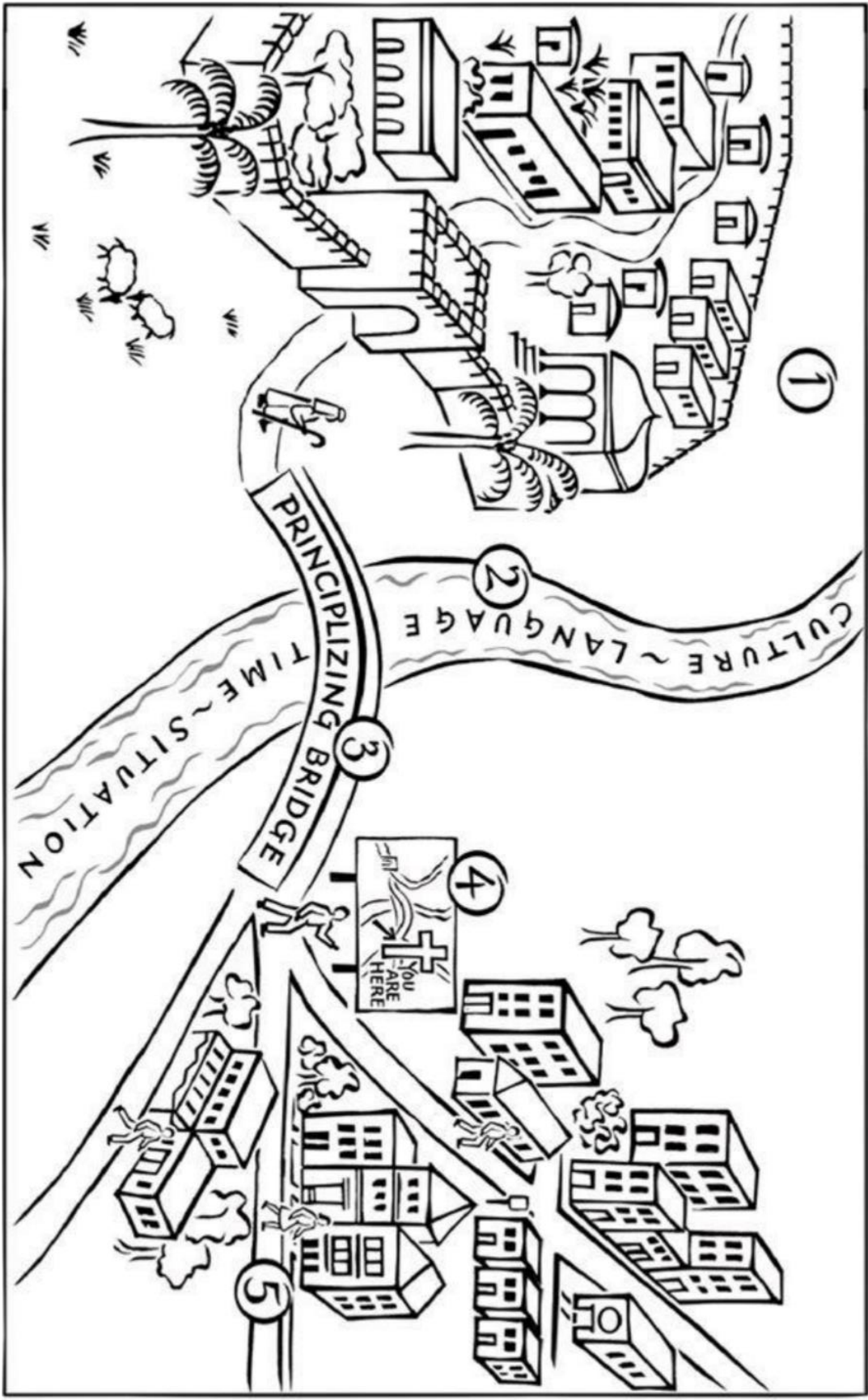
- **Step Two – Measure the Width of the River to Cross**

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

- Language – What language were Saul and Samuel speaking? What language did Samuel 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 people of Israel in their culture that is not as familiar to us today?
- 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 Israel's relationship to God in this story? 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 Old 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 continues 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 Leviticus 23:22, we read: "And when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to its edge, nor shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. You shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I am the Lord."

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 almost all families in Israel were given an allowance of land to farm and raise their families when God led them to conquer the Promised Land. We would notice that this verse is part of the book of Leviticus, a book of laws, and that this verse is in the middle of a chapter of laws about the special feasts and days of worship that the Lord commanded Israel to keep. Knowing this context helps us to realize that this verse must be related to worshiping and honoring God in a way that pleases him. We will also notice that at the end of this verse, God explains that people are to leave some of the harvest in the field for the benefit of poor people and sojourners (foreigners living in Israel or those traveling through), those who do not have land to grow food. Then, God states his holy name, showing that this command is connected to his own character; he is a God who cares for the poor and the vulnerable.

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! Many people today do not own farms, and even those who have farms do not always grow all of their food there. And it is not common to allow poor people or foreigners to come to a farm and harvest some of the food for themselves. So when God, "You shall leave them for the poor and the sojourner," we might wonder what to do with that. The key to understanding comes at the end of this verse when God says, "I am the Lord your God." This is where we can see the biblical principle we want to keep! After commanding the Israelites to leave a bit of harvest for the poor and the sojourners, God reminds them of his holiness by repeating his name, and he reminds them of their relationship to him, saying, "I am the Lord, *your God*." In other words, God is saying that he cares for the poor and the vulnerable, and he expects his people to share the same care for

those who are in need. Our timeless truth is that God's people reflect God's heart by showing care for those in need and always giving something to help them. 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, especially the New Testament?
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 Leviticus 23:22, our unchanging biblical principle might be:

"God commands his people to show his heart to the world by always caring for the poor and vulnerable around them."

- **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 Bible, then we know that we need to go back and work again. To do this step well, 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 Leviticus 23:22 that we have been discussing. At the end of step three we stated our timeless truth in this way: "God commands his people to show his heart to the world by always caring for the poor and vulnerable around them." To check this principle, we want to look for other passages in the Bible that speak about the heart of God for the poor and what is expected for his followers. Because this is an Old Testament verse, we want to be careful to see that the principle taught here is also supported in the New Testament teachings.

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

Here are a few samples:

- Leviticus 25:35, “If your brother become poor and cannot maintain himself with you, you shall support him as though he were a stranger and a sojourner, and he shall live with you.”
- Proverbs 14:31, “Whoever oppresses a poor man insults his Maker, but he who is generous to the needy honors him.”
- Luke 14:13-14, “But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just.”
- 1 John 3:17, “But if anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him?”

Looking at these verses together, we can conclude that our timeless truth agrees with the whole Bible 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 1 Samuel 15:17-23, the story of God rejecting Saul as king over Israel because Saul had disobeyed his command to completely destroy the Amalekites. 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 1 Samuel 15:17-23 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 1 Samuel 15:17-23, God speaks through the prophet Samuel to reject Saul as king over Israel because of his disobedience and to declare that God is pleased by faithful obedience to his Word more than extravagant sacrifices."

ASK: Let's think again about the river between "our town" today and "their town" in 1 Samuel 15. 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 Samuel's message to Saul 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, we are not kings and the old covenant that Israel had with God is no longer in effect. This means that Samuel's message that God is rejecting Saul as king cannot apply to us today. However, the strong statement that God is pleased by obedience and listening more than by sacrifices and offerings has not changed. Today, we must ask ourselves, "What does God want to see when he looks at our lives?"

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 1 Samuel 15:17-23 might be:

"God declares that he is pleased by those who are faithful to listen to his Word and obey what he says more than those who only bring large offerings or sacrifices."

- **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?

Two examples can be found in the life of Jesus himself. In Matthew 9:13, Jesus corrects the Pharisees hard hearts by quoting Hosea 6:6 (a verse very similar to this passage), saying, “Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice.’” Also, in John 14:15, he tells his disciples, “If you love me, you will keep (or obey) my commandments.” Both of these verses support the statement that God is looking for those who are committed to obeying his Words.

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?

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 we 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 Leviticus 23:22. What do we learn about God’s heart for vulnerable people in this verse? This verse reveals that caring for poor people and sojourners is a reflection of God’s holy and pure heart. If we truly believe that, it will affect the way that we see people in the world around us. Believing that God cares deeply for people who have no power or wealth or advantages in the world helps us to understand that his love and mercy is greater than anything else we see around us. Believing that God cares for the weak and poor must mean that we are never out of the reach of his care, even if we don’t understand or see him working for us at this moment. 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 the example of Leviticus 23:22 again. What must we do in response to this verse? Many of us do not have fields, and even if we left harvest, the poor or sojourners would not know that they were free to take the extra food today. But God clearly wants us to show his care for the poor and weak in our world today. This means we should never do anything to take advantage of someone who is poor or from a

foreign country. It also means that by giving to the poor, we can show God's love for them through our own generosity.

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 points 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, 1 Samuel 15:17-23. 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 1 Samuel 15:17-23 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 1 Samuel 15:17-23, God speaks through the prophet Samuel to reject Saul as king over Israel because of his disobedience and to declare that God is pleased by faithful obedience to his Word more than extravagant sacrifices."

ASK: (Step Two) Let's think again about the river between "our town" today and "their town" in 1 Samuel 15. What are some of the important differences we found between our languages, cultures, situations, and relationship to God?

ASK: What are some details of Samuel's message to Saul 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, we are not kings and the old covenant that Israel had with God is no longer in effect. This means that Samuel's message that God is rejecting Saul as king cannot apply to us today. However, the strong statement that God is pleased by obedience and listening more than by sacrifices and offerings has not changed. Today, we must ask ourselves, "What does God want to see when he looks at our lives?"

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 1 Samuel 15:17-23 might be:

"God declares that he is pleased by those who are faithful to listen to his Word and obey what he says more than those who only bring large offerings or sacrifices."

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

Two examples can be found in the life of Jesus himself. In Matthew 9:13, Jesus corrects the Pharisees hard hearts by quoting Hosea 6:6 (a verse very similar to this passage), saying, "Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice.'" Also, in John 14:15, he tells his disciples, "If you love me, you will keep (or obey) my commandments." Both of these verses support the statement that God is looking for those who are committed to obeying his Words.

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

Now that we have identified the timeless truth in 1 Samuel 15:17-23 and agreed that this principle agrees with the rest of the message of the Bible, 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: *“God declares that he is pleased by those who are faithful to listen to his Word and obey what he says more than those who only bring large offerings or sacrifices.”*

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.

Example: Students might observe that Saul thought that he God would forget about his disobedience if he just offered a big sacrifice later. Today, people abuse the Bible’s teachings about grace to say that they can disobey God’s Word in many different ways and just ask God to forgive them later. This is the same error that Saul made, and it dishonors God.

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.

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 Old Testament that we discussed? Explain one thing we need to remember when reading each one.

- The History (or Narrative Stories) in the Old Testament.
- Old Testament Law.
- Wisdom and Writings (or Poetry).
- Old Testament Prophets.

ASK: What are some things that we need to remember when interpreting each of the different genres of writing found in the Old 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:

- History (or Narrative Stories) in the Old Testament – Exodus 3:1-22
- Old Testament Law – Leviticus 25:35-38
- Wisdom and Writings (or Poetry) – Psalms 62
- Old Testament Prophets – Isaiah 56:1-8

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.

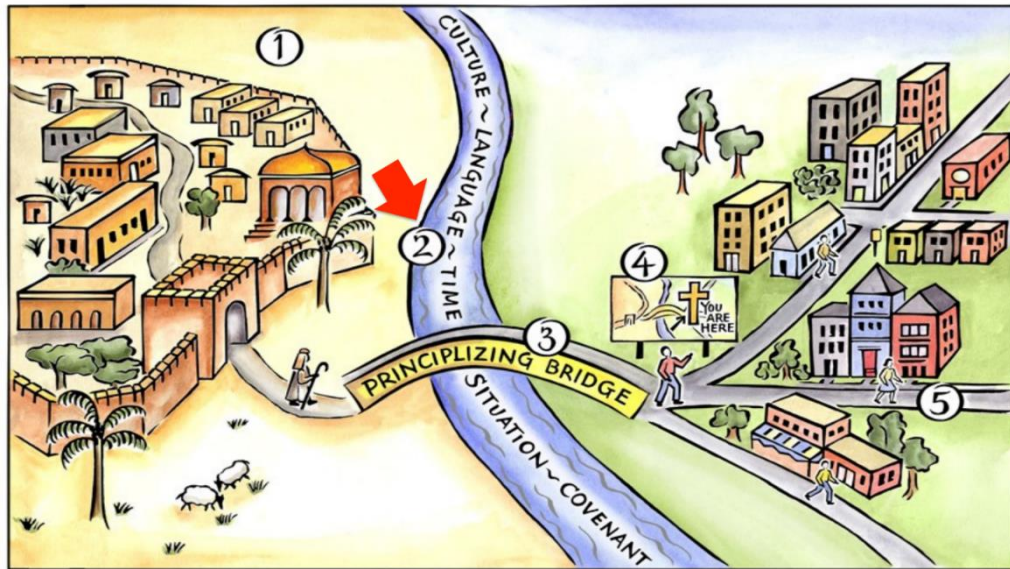
The second part of the exam is a group project. The group will work together for 30-45 minutes to follow the steps of the Interpretive Journey to the best of their ability. You will assign them a specific passage from the New Testament to study and interpret. They can talk, use their Bibles and study 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 Old 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 Old Testament writing contains specific rules and guidelines to govern the lives and worship of the people of Israel?
- a. History in the Old Testament
 - b. Old Testament Law
 - c. Old Testament Prophets
8. 1 Samuel 15:17-23, God rejecting Saul as king over Israel, is an example of what kind of Old Testament writing?
- a. History in the Old Testament
 - b. Old Testament Law
 - c. Old Testament Prophets
9. Which Old Testament genre is full of figures of speech and unique forms of Hebrew writing?
- a. History in the Old Testament
 - b. Old Testament Law
 - c. Wisdom and Writings

Interpreting the Old 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 Old Testament writing contains specific rules and guidelines to govern the lives and worship of the people of Israel?
- a. History in the Old Testament
 - b. **Old Testament Law**
 - c. Old Testament Prophets
8. 1 Samuel 15:17-23, God rejecting Saul as king over Israel, is an example of what kind of Old Testament writing?
- a. **History in the Old Testament**
 - b. Old Testament Law
 - c. Old Testament Prophets
9. Which Old Testament genre is full of figures of speech and unique forms of Hebrew writing?
- a. History in the Old Testament
 - b. Old Testament Law
 - c. **Wisdom and Writings**

Interpreting the Old Testament

Group Project

For this part of the final exam students must work as a group to study a passage from the Old 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:

- History in the Old Testament – 1 Kings 18:20-40
- Old Testament Law – Deuteronomy 6:4-9
- Old Testament Prophets – Micah 6:6-8

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.