

**Reading the Bible for Deep Delight**  
First Methodist Church of Tulsa  
Spring 2024

## Who makes meaning? How to we read?

**What is meaning?**

**How do I understand the meaning of the text?**

**How do I receive meaning from relationship with God?**

### STEPS IN BIBLE STUDY

**OBSERVATION: What does it say?**

1. Make Outline
2. Ask Questions: Who? Where? When?
3. Key Verse

**INTERPRETATION: What does it mean? Why?**

1. Are there any principles?
2. Are there any commandments?
3. Are there any promises?
4. Are there positive or negative characteristics?
5. Ask questions about anything.
  1. Questions: What does it mean? Why?  
What is its Significance?
  2. Answers: Look for evidence in context, in helps.
6. Standard Question:  
What should the disciples have learned about?:
  1. Godly Character
  2. Understanding Truth

3. Ministry/Mission to others
4. Personal Relationship with God (Father, Son or Holy Spirit)
5. Relationships with each other (or others)

**APPLICATION: What does it mean for me?**

1. Principles: How does this apply?
2. Commandments: How do I obey?
3. Promises: How do I claim it?
4. Characteristics: How do I imitate or avoid?
5. Standard Question:

How do each of God's objectives in this passage apply in my life?

1. Godly Character
2. Understanding Truth
3. Fruitful Ministry
4. Personal Relationship with God
5. Relationships with Others.

Who makes meaning? How do we read?

All of life is about interpretation. We read billboards and books. We read faces. We read actions. We read what we hear. We read what we feel. We interpret the meaning of such things as we process what we see and hear and feel. Think about the game you might have played on Halloween when you were younger and someone would pass you a bowl of cold spaghetti noodles and tell you it was a brain, or peeled grapes are eyeballs. You have to process that within the context of the Halloween party, the fact that it's Halloween, the fact that Halloween is supposed to be a little bit scary and maybe a little gross, etc. How do you interpret that? If you suspend disbelief and participate, you might think, eww, that's what a brain or eyeballs feel like. You give those things meaning. Or try this. Say you're a husband and you ask your wife how she's doing and she says, "Fine." The word fine means something—it means everything is stable and okay, right?—but you also interpret the tone and the facial expression she makes when she says it. What is the meaning? Unless you are a brick, you'll interpret that as, "oh, she's feeling anything but fine."

This is what I mean when I say all of life is about interpretation. Words and objects have meaning. St. Augustine, in his work *Teaching Christianity*, says,

**“All teaching is either about things or sins, things are learned about through signs: What I have now called things, though, in the strict sense, are those that are not mentioned in order to signify something, such as wood, a stone, an animal, and other things like that. Not, however, that piece of wood which we read of Moses throwing into the bitter water to remove its bitterness; nor that stone which Jacob placed under his head; nor that animal which Abraham sacrificed instead of his son. All these, in fact are**

**things in such a way as also to be signs of other things. There are, however, other signs which are only used for signifying, such as words. Nobody, after all, uses words except for the sake of signifying something.” (110)**

There are things, like this pen. We know what a pen is. But if that pen started writing a prophetic word on a pad without anyone touching it, we would, rightly, think it was something else. We would think it was pointing to something else. In the same way, a word is just a word until it's strung together with other words that signify something to us. That's what we get when we read. We're reading not just symbols on a page pointing to a particular thing, but to convey a particular reality. That's what happens when we read.

Now, that all sounds very complicated and maybe even a little bit stodgy. Why is this something we need to talk about when it comes to reading the Bible. Can't we just read it? In one sense, yes, but in a billion other senses, no. So, when we move along with a concept of the Bible as God's revelation of himself and the world to us in a way that is supposed to give shape and, make sure you get this, *meaning*, then we need to talk about a particular way of reading that takes into account the multiple layers of meaning that comes with the territory of 1) being human and 2) being in a relationship with a revealing God.

If all of that sounds a little too complicated, I want us to just consider two layers this evening that are important for reading the Bible in a way that deepens relationship and intimacy with a God who really wants to reveal himself to us in a way that we can understand and live off of in joyful ways. Again, Augustine says, “*The purpose of scripture study is both to discover its meaning and to pass it on to others; both tasks to be undertaken with God's help* (109 Augustine).” Discover meaning. Pass it on. With God's help. The third being the most important.

Let me start out with a little exercise. You may have read, when you were in junior high or in high school the poem by Carl Sandburg called *Fog*. It goes like this:

**The fog comes  
on little cat feet.**

**It sits looking  
over harbor and city  
on silent haunches  
and then moves on.**

To start with, we notice what the genre is. It's a poem. What do we know about poems? They're often metaphors, or at least they employ a lot of them. Metaphors are *symbols* for real *things* if we're going to use Augustine's language here. So if we're trying to interpret this poem, the very first thing we have to do is identify the genre. It's a poem. Secondly, we have to look at what it's saying. This is the layer of understanding what it says. There's a phrase for this in Latin called *sensus literalis*. The "literal sense" of a text. Sandburg says that the fog comes on little cat feet. Can you picture that in your head? What are you picturing? If you're imagining a big fluffy cat moving around, you're getting your head around the literal sense of the poem. And that's important. You have to know what the concrete thing is if you want to understand the symbol. If you didn't know what a cat was, you'd never be able to make your mind understand that the fog in the Bay Area looked like a finicky cat that comes in for a little bit and then moves on without paying attention to anyone. The fog isn't a cat. They are two different things. But, the fuller sense, the *sensus plenior* helps us interpret what Sandburg is saying. The way the fog rolls in is *like* a cat moving around.

So when we read the Bible, the first layer is the work of trying our best to discern what the text actually says. The second layer is discerning what God is saying to us through it. And there might be a difference, but I want to come back to that.

First, what does this mean for you when you sit down and open your Bible to read. Remember what I said in week one? This is the tough part for me. The part where I get a little self-conscious and, frankly, nervous because I don't want to "get it wrong." I don't know if you've ever felt the same way, but it can be overwhelming if not insurmountable. How do I understand what the text is saying and then what it meant to the original intended audience. This is what we commonly treat as *Bible Study*. When we read Romans together in the Men's Ministry, we're trying to ascertain what the Bible is saying and what it meant and what it means today. There's so much information out there, it's hard to know where to get started. In Robert A. Train's original book on the topic, *Methodical Bible Study*, he lists four main steps in Bible study:

1. Observation
2. Interpretation
3. Evaluation & Application
4. Correlation

Observation is seeing what's there while being aware of the assumptions we talked about last week. First, figure out what the genre is. Is it history, poetry, theology, prophetic, apocalyptic, a letter? That'll help you make sense of what you're looking at. If you're just looking at a few paragraphs or a chapter, some observational questions you might ask are the old stand-bys for journalists back when there used to be such a thing: who? What? Where? When? Why? How? It's important with these questions not to let your instructions fill in the gaps but to let the text speak for

itself. For instance, if you're reading Luke 2 and you get to the question "when?" don't reflexively say, "Well, I think I remember that Jesus was born around 3 BC so that's when it happened." Say, "what does the text say? Does it give any clues?" In this case, yes. In the first two verses we read, "In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. <sup>2</sup> This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria." That's when it happened. If you want to dig deeper, you can try looking up in a Bible dictionary about when the reigns of both of those guys' rules overlapped with one another. But you really don't have to at this stage. Just answer the questions based upon what the text says. If you don't know, that's okay. But these questions will help break you out of your assumptions and let the text speak for itself, which is the goal.

You can then drill down a little deeper. Are there any words or phrases that the writer repeats? Can you identify any metaphors? Note the prepositions because if you see a "but" there's a contrast going on. If you see a "like" there's a comparison. If you see a "therefore" or an "in order that" there's a logical connection being made between ideas. What do those tell you? There's a structure there that may be pointing you to something important that the author wants you to know.

After you've done all the observing you can do, then you begin the work of interpretation. This is another area in which questions are important. What do you infer based upon your work in the text? Let's look at Matthew 5:43-48 and walk through the observation and interpretation of a short passage and see where we get:

**Matt. 5:43** "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' <sup>44</sup> But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, <sup>45</sup> so that you may be sons of

your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. <sup>46</sup> For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? <sup>47</sup> And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? <sup>48</sup> You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Who? What? Where? When? Why? How?

What does Jesus mean when he says, “You therefore must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect?” Or what do we infer he might mean based upon the text?

Then how do we apply it to ourselves?

This is where the work of Bible study can be so fruitful. But let me tell you, if you get far enough to answer that question of application but it doesn't cause you to respond to it, what good did all that work do? It amounted to nothing! **James 1:22-25** But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. <sup>23</sup> For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. <sup>24</sup> For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. <sup>25</sup> But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.

This is what happened to me in Romans this week.

Let's pause for a minute. That's how we distill meaning from the text. It's the process of letting it speak authoritatively over us.

But there's another sense in which meaning comes to us, specifically to us that doesn't change the fundamental meaning of the text, but instead it creates an experience of relationship with God in such a way that it gives meaning to us. Bible study will help us understand how the Scriptures are understood and applied for everyone. But sometimes God will illuminate a passage for us, as individuals, that will create meaning for us as we walk in relationship with God. Does that make sense? It might not unless I illustrate it. Isaiah 41:10 says, "fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."

Now, God was speaking to a particular people at a particular time through the prophet Isaiah. Threats of exile and destruction. If we do the work we might come to an application that says God has his eye on his covenant people. Even today, he has his eye on his bride, the church, and he is present and a help to her. Trust God. Fine. But say one day you're reading the Scriptures, and you've prayed "Lord, highlight something for me today that I can carry with me and pray. I'm feeling worn out and anxious." Then this passage is a part of your reading and you sense the Holy Spirit saying, "I'm speaking these words to you today." That's not a word for the church or the world, it's a word for *you*. He's using his Word to give you a word. The path from a to be is one of asking and receiving.