

**Hermeneutics Workshop 02:
Challenges of Interpretation**
For the Bible Institute at GCBC Fall 2026
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Introduction:

Hermeneutics is important because the Bible is divine revelation. God has chosen to communicate through human authors to specific audiences. God's Word has meaning, and it is meant to be understood. Proper hermeneutics allows us to better understand God's Word. However, interpretation is not always an easy task. There are many challenges to interpretation because we are separated from the biblical text in multiple ways. These challenges are often ignored or overlooked, and that can lead to poor interpretation of Scripture. We should seek to identify these challenges, and then apply good principles of interpretation to these challenges in order to find the true meaning of the text.

Course Overview:

- Week 1: Introduction: Why does Hermeneutics Matter?
 - **Homework: Choose a Passage**
- Week 2: Challenges of Interpretation
 - **Homework: Identify interpretive challenges**
- Week 3: Principles of Interpretation
 - **Homework: Establish interpretive principles**
- Week 4: Systems of Interpretation
 - **Homework: Consider theological/systematic assumptions**
- Week 5: Historical Interpretation: Bible Context
 - **Homework: Research surrounding context**
- Week 6: Historical Interpretation: Cultural Context
 - **Homework: Research cultural context**
- Week 7: Grammatical Interpretation: Genre
 - **Homework: Analyze literary genre**
- Week 8: Grammatical Interpretation: Grammar & Syntax
 - **Homework: Analyze grammar and syntax**
- Week 9: Grammatical Interpretation: Word Study
 - **Homework: Pick a word and conduct a word study**
- Week 10: Application: What Did it Mean to Them?
 - **Homework: Determine original meaning/application**
- Week 11: Application: What Does it Mean for the Church?
 - **Homework: Present a brief interpretation and application**
- **Free Online Resources:**
 - Blue Letter Bible
 - Bible Hub

The Gap Between Us and Them:

We are separated from the biblical text in multiple ways. We are not living in the same time period. We are not living in the same geographical location. We are not living in the same culture. We do not speak the same language. We do not have the same literature. We are not necessarily in the same spiritual condition. However, this does not mean that God's Word is impossible to understand. God's Word is intended to communicate truth, and God decided that this is the best way to communicate truth at this point in time. We must not assume that our modern perspective is identical to that of the original readers. As interpreters of Scripture, we must learn how to bridge the gap between us and them.

The Time Gap:

The Bible was written in a different time period. The Bible was written over a time period of around 1,500 years, and the last part of the New Testament was written around 2,000 years ago. This means that we are separated from every passage of Scripture anywhere from 2,000 to 3,500 years. We must learn how to bridge this time gap.

Bridging this time gap requires an understanding of progressive revelation and the dispensations of Scripture. People in the Old Testament had a different amount of revelation than people in the New Testament. Therefore, we must interpret the Old Testament with this time gap in mind. We cannot expect the Old Testament audience to have interpreted Scripture in light of New Testament teachings because they did not have the New Testament at that time. We must understand what that passage meant to them without imposing our current level of progressive revelation upon the text. Sometimes the New Testament provides more clarity on an Old Testament passage, but that passage still had a meaning to the original audience that we must seek to understand. We must ask, "What amount of revelation did they have at the time of this passage?" God was also working and communicating with people differently throughout different periods of time. God walked with Adam and Eve in the garden. God talked directly to Abraham. God gave Israel the Law through His servant Moses. We must seek to understand these differences in order for us to understand what the text meant to the original audience.

Bridging this time gap also requires an understanding of the historical context. The historical timing of the text influences how the original audience would have received the text. What major events were happening at the time of the text? Many times the text itself points us to the major historical events that are particularly relevant to the text. Judges tells us that "in those days there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes." The fact that Israel had no king is relevant to all the events we find within the book of Judges, and this historical detail helps point us to the meaning of the text. Daniel starts by saying "In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah came Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon unto Jerusalem, and besieged it." The fact that Israel was taken into Babylonian captivity is relevant to the events that take place within the book, and this historical detail helps point us to the meaning of the text. Scripture often pinpoints the time of a text to a particular year because the timing of the text is relevant to the meaning of the passage. We must use this information to help us bridge this time gap between us and them.

The Geographical Gap:

All of the Bible takes place in different geographical locations than where you and I live right now. Most of the Bible takes place in Israel and the Middle East. Geography influences how someone will interpret a passage. You could say the exact same thing in two different

places, and it could be received two totally different ways. We must learn how to bridge this geographical gap.

Scripture often pinpoints the extra location of the text. The location of the writer, the audience, and the events are all relevant to the meaning of the text. Scripture puts an emphasis on the geographical setting of the text. The Old Testament includes detailed descriptions about the movements of Israel. The Gospels include detailed descriptions about the movements of Jesus. Acts includes detailed descriptions about the missionary journeys of Paul. If Scripture puts such an emphasis on geography, then it must be important to the meaning of the text. We must use this information to help us bridge the geographical gap between us and them.

John 4 is a classic example of the importance of geography in some passages. John 4:3-4 says, "He left Judaea, and departed again into Galilee. And he must needs go through Samaria." Jesus needed to go through Samaria because of geography. Going through Samaria was the most direct path of travel. However, this was where Jesus ended up having the conversation with the Samaritan woman about living water. Therefore, this decision to go through Samaria was an intentional decision by Jesus beyond just the geography.

The Cultural Gap:

All of the Bible takes place in different cultures than the culture that you and I live in today. The customs surrounding a passage of Scripture greatly influence the meaning of the passage. A detail that may seem minor to us could have really stood out as significant to the original audience. You could say the same thing in two different cultures, and it could be received two totally different ways. We must learn how to bridge this cultural gap.

Understanding the culture of the Bible adds much more depth and significance to many of the events we read about in Scripture. John 13 contains an examples of this when Jesus washed the disciples feet. If we just imposed that story into our current culture, then we would probably think of foot washing at dinner as weird. Many of us would probably be really uncomfortable with someone else washing our feet. However, the cultural context of this passage adds to the significance of what Jesus was doing. It was usually a household servant or slave that would wash the feet of guests. If there were no servants, than the host would at least provide the guests with water to wash their feet. This task was particularly important in biblical times because they did not wear the same type of shoes that we wear today. Sandals were common footwear in biblical times. People usually travelled by foot, and they usually travelled on dusty roads. Feet became dirty throughout the day. Therefore, foot washing was a task associated with humility that was commonly done by a servant or slave. This adds significance to what Jesus was trying to teach His disciples. Jesus was not just doing a nice act for the disciples, He was taking on the role of a servant. Scripture includes many other cultural details that contribute to the meaning of the text. We must use this information to help us bridge the cultural gap between us and them.

The Language Gap:

All of the Bible was written in different languages than the languages that you and I speak today. Most of the Bible was written in Hebrew and Greek, and there is a little bit written in Aramaic. The language of a passage of Scripture influences the meaning of the passage. Communicating to someone that speaks a different language can be difficult. Translation can be fully accurate, but it can sometimes be difficult to find a word that is totally equivalent to a word in the original language. We must learn how to bridge this language gap.

An English translation can accurately represent the original languages, but sometimes it can be difficult to show all the distinctions that the original languages show. “Love” is a classic example of this difficulty. We use the English word “love” to describe many different kinds of love. However, Greek has multiple different words for the concept of “love.” Therefore, when we see the word “love,” we cannot assume that it means the exact same kind of love every time. John 21 contains the conversation between Jesus and Peter. That passage uses two different Greek words for love, but we do not see that as easily in the English translation. “World” is another example of a word that poses some difficulty in translation. A few different Greek words are translated to the English word “world.” Acts 17 contains two different Greek words that are both translated world, and they mean something different. Acts 17:6 says, “these that have turned the world upside down...” and Acts 17:24 says, “God that made the world...” These are obviously talking about two different things, and studying the Greek words behind them help us understand the difference. Even English words change in their meaning over time. “Conversation” is an example of English word that used to have a wider scope of meaning than how we typically use it today. Philippians 3:20 says, “For our conversation is in heaven...” Conversation in this verse means citizenship or community. I Peter 1:15 says “... be ye holy in all manner of conversation.” Conversation in this verse mean conduct or behavior. Therefore, the KJV translators used conversation in a much broader sense than how we typically use the word today. Translation requires some level of interpretation, and thus we must account for the philosophy of interpretation of the translators. We should not be intimidated by the fact that the Bible was written in different languages. However, we also should not ignore the reality that proper interpretation of Scripture will take more effort for us than it would for the original audience that spoke the original languages. A language barrier can create a large gap between different groups of people, but we must seek to bridge this gap between us and them.

The Literary Gap:

The Bible was written in many different kinds of literature, and some of those kinds of literature are less familiar to us than others. The literature of the passage influences the meaning of the passage. We must learn how to bridge this literary gap.

A large portion of Scripture is written in Hebrew poetry which has some distinct features that are different from most of the literature that we use today. Hebrew poetry involves a lot of parallelism. Understanding parallelism is helpful for determining the meaning of the passage. Hebrew poetry is easier to understand when we understand the different types of parallelism. Hebrew poetry also involves aspects of the Hebrew language that we may be unfamiliar with. Psalm 119 has 22 sections that correspond to the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Some aspects of poetry rely upon the rhythm and sound patterns of an original language that are sometimes lost in translation. Some similes and metaphors involve comparisons to things that we may not be as familiar with as the original audience was. We must learn to identify these literary devices in order to help us bridge this literary gap between us and them.

The Spiritual Gap:

The Bible was written to people with different spiritual conditions, and sometimes those spiritual conditions differ from our spiritual condition today. Some of the Bible specifically addresses unbelievers. Some of the Bible addresses people with different blessings and promises than the blessings and promises that we possess today. We must learn how to bridge this spiritual gap.

This spiritual gap sometimes can actually put us in an advantageous position for understanding Scripture. As New Testament believers, we have the indwelling Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the Author of Scripture, and we have the Author of Scripture living inside of us. The Holy Spirit enables us to understand spiritual truths about God and His Word. I Corinthians 2:9-14 says, “But as it is written, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him. But God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit: for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God. For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him? even so the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God. Which things also we speak, not in the words which man’s wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual. But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.” The Holy Spirit teaches us the things of God. I John 2:27 also says, “But the anointing which ye have received of him abideth in you, and ye need not that any man teach you: but as the same anointing teacheth you of all things, and is truth, and is no lie, and even as it hath taught you, ye shall abide in him.” This puts us at an advantage compared to unbelievers when it comes to understanding and applying God’s Word. So if Scripture ever addresses unbelievers, then it should not be expected for that audience to always fully grasp the significance of the message. Sometimes unbelievers are addressed in narrative, but God is trying to communicate something to believers through revelation that was delivered to an unbeliever. It is important for us to bridge the spiritual gap between us and the original audience in order to understand what God was intending to communicate through that passage.

We are dependent on the teaching of the Holy Spirit to lead us to the right interpretation of Scripture. This means that hermeneutics should never become a matter of pride. Sometimes much learning can cause us to become proud of all the information that we have accumulated. However, we are dependent on the teaching of the Holy Spirit and this ought to keep us humble in our interpretation of Scripture. We should be careful to not allow hermeneutics to become an area of pride and arrogance. We could learn nothing of spiritual significance without the teaching of the Holy Spirit.

Some Things That Do Not Change:

We have discussed a lot of things that change between the original audience and us. However, it is also important for us to remember that certain things do not change. God’s character does not change. Therefore, we can always learn something about God’s character from any part of God’s Word. God’s character was the same at the time of Genesis as it is today. God’s character is same today as it will be in the future events of prophecy. God’s Word also does not change. Therefore, we can read the exact same thing today that believers have read for the last 2,000 years. God’s Word is preserved for us today which means that we do not have to question whether or not God actually said what He said. This also means that the meaning of a passage of Scripture does not change. Application can vary over time, but the meaning remains the same. Progressive revelation can provide more clarity to previous revelation, but it does not change the meaning of the passage. What Paul intended to communicate to the Corinthians 2,000 years ago has not taken on a different meaning over time. Truth also does not change. The truth that Abraham had a son named Isaac will never change. The truth that Moses led Israel out of slavery in Egypt will never change. The truth that Jesus died on the cross for our

sins and rose again will never change. We are very far removed from these historical events, but they are still just as true today as they were when they were written down thousands of years ago. The sin nature also does not fundamentally change. We still have the same sinful desires and temptations that all of fallen mankind has had. Culture may cause these sinful desires to manifest in slightly different ways, but the same root problem is there. We can see the works of the flesh manifested all throughout the pages of Scripture. These things that fundamentally do not change over time are helpful for us when we are trying to bridge the gap between us and the original audience.

Homework – Identify Interpretive Challenges:

Now, you should seek to identify the interpretive challenges in the passage that you have chosen. What is the time gap? What is the geographical gap? What is the cultural gap? What is the language gap? What is the literary gap? What is the spiritual gap? Some of your passages will have more challenges than others. Some passages require more work in order to bridge the gap between us and the original audience. Your job this week is to just measure the gap. Do not try to solve the challenges yet, but just seek to identify them.

Conclusion:

God has communicated His Word in a manner than can be understood, but He expects us to diligently study it rather than assume that our modern perspective is identical to that of the original readers. We must be able to bridge the gap between us and the original audience. This means that we need to consider time, geography, culture, language, literature, and spiritual condition. We must bridge these gaps in order for us to understand what the text originally meant to them before we can properly apply the text to our own lives.