



Guiding Principles

1. Beware of preconceptions. Observe what the biblical texts actually say.¹ John 3:16-21.

[16] *For God* so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that *whoever believes in him* should not perish but have eternal life. [17] *For God* did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. [18] *Whoever believes in him* is not condemned, but *whoever does not believe* is condemned already, because *he has not believed* in the name of the only Son of God. [19] And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. [20] For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. [21] But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God. (John 3:16–21 ESV)

- a. Verses 16 and 17 begin with “For God.”
 - b. Verses 16 and 18 both contain the phrase “whoever believes in him.”
 - c. Verse 18 has “whoever does not believe” and “he has not believed.”
 - d. Verses 16-18 have four instances of a form of the word *believe*.
 - e. Verses 16-19 have five instances of the word *world*.
 - f. Verses 19-21 have the word *works* three times and the word *does* three times.
 - g. Verses 19-21 have five instances of the word *light*.
2. Observe the text first, then explain it. As explanation proceeds, be sure it fits your observations.²
 - a. God has sent his Son into the world.
 - b. The Son brings eternal life to those who believe in him.
 - c. Those who do not believe remain under condemnation.
 - d. Belief or unbelief is demonstrated by works.
 - e. Wicked works demonstrate a love of darkness and a hatred of the light.
 - f. Righteous works demonstrate a hatred of darkness and a love of the light.
 3. Resist reshaping your observations so that they support your preferred theology.³
 - a. Arminian – Arminian theology believes John 3:16 teaches that Jesus died for every single person whether they are saved or not.
 - b. Reformed – The Reformed can narrow the scope to only the elect.

¹ Daniel M. Doriani, *Getting the Message* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1996), 15.

² Ibid., 16.

³ Ibid., 17.



4. Make note of any details that are for any reason especially striking.⁴

- Appearance – are details of a person's appearance important to the text?
- Verb tenses – does the fact that the verbs are in past, present, or future tense make a difference?
- Pronouns – does understanding the referents of the pronouns add to our understanding?
- Cultural – is understanding the culture important to understanding the text?

Keys to Interpretation

Prayer

Apart from the help of the Holy Spirit the Bible is a closed book.

- Colossians 1:9
- Ephesians 1:15-20

Natural Sense

Read the Scriptures according to their natural sense.

- 1 Corinthians 15:32
- 2 Timothy 4:16-18

Context

Reading in context means reading every word as part of a sentence, every sentence within the paragraph, every paragraph with the chapter, every chapter within the book, every book in the context of the author's other books, and every author in the context of God's on-going revelation with the ultimate goal of reading a text in the context of the whole Bible.⁵

1. Reading Scripture in context clarifies passages that may seem confusing or contradictory.
2. Reading Scripture with the context in mind protects us against a concordance mentality.

⁴ Ibid., 18.

⁵ Ibid., 71-72.



- Romans 9:3
 - Romans 13:14
3. Reading Scripture in context keeps us from the amplified mentality.

Jesus

The message of the Bible centers on Jesus.

1. How is Jesus connected to this passage?
 2. How is this passage connected to Jesus?
- John 5:39-40
 - Luke 24:27
 - Luke 24:44-47

The Unfolding Drama

- The Grand Narrative
- The Big Picture
 - Genesis 3:15
- The Plot Line
 - Pay attention to what is happening to the covenant promises as God establishes his kingdom or as his people rebel and experience covenant judgment.
 - Read every narrative in the light of the conflict described in Genesis 3:15.
 - Understand that those that are advancing the plot line will, to some degree, have their lives drawn into the pattern by which God will ultimately fulfil his promise in the sufferings, death, resurrection, and triumph of Jesus.



Biblical Logic

Biblical logic is imperatives follow indicatives. God works redemption on behalf of his people and his people respond in faith and obedience.

Genre

We must pay attention to the type of literature we are reading.