

# Session 4 – Interpretation

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The second step of IBS is interpretation, which answers the question, “What does the section mean?” The purpose is to understand the meaning of the text as intended by the author. Some have described this as “thinking God’s thoughts after him.” Interpretation flows from observation, and as you gain experience, they may blend together.

It’s important to understand the nature of truth. The meaning of a passage is not our opinion (e.g., “This is what I think the section means” or “This is what the section means to me.”), nor is it our response (e.g., “I like this” or “This feels right to me.”). It is the meaning that the author intended when he wrote it. This is objective, not subjective, truth.

Interpretation is necessary because we are 2,000 years removed from the most recently written books in the Bible, because the Bible was written in a dead language that’s not our native tongue, and because we live in a completely different culture than that of the authors. These not only make interpretation necessary, they also make it difficult. The simple reality is that you may not always find the right meaning of the text. That’s ok; study anyway. There’s lots that is very knowable.

While obeying the rules of interpretation—which we will study next—we use secondary sources to help us answer our questions so that we can rewrite the text in our own words and determine the main idea of the text.

## Use Secondary Resources

The **first step** of interpretation is to use our secondary sources (i.e., Bible dictionaries, study Bibles, and commentaries) to help answer the questions that remain from observation. To find information about a person, place, or thing, use your Bible dictionary. To find information about a specific verse, read your commentaries and the notes in your study Bible. Commentaries are best all-around tool; they can double-check your observation, answer your hard questions, and help you see the things you missed. You could also download an MP3 of a sermon on your section. There are some excellent sermons available online:

- John Piper (<http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/sermons/by-scripture>)
- John MacArthur (<http://www.gty.org/Resources/Bible+Book+Studies>)
- Danny Akin (<http://www.danielakin.com/?cat=75>)

## Practice

Use commentaries to answer this question: In 1 Pt 2:2, what is “pure spiritual milk” (HCSB)? Why does the NASB call it the “pure milk of the word”?

## Write Your Understanding

At this point you have answered all your questions, thus you should have a pretty good idea of what your text means. The **second step** of interpretation is to write your understanding of each verse; list what you understand the verse to mean and why you understand it this way. You will include information both from your observations and your secondary sources. You might find it handy to keep this question in mind: If you came back to this document one year later and re-read it, would it tell you everything you need to understand this verse?

## Rewrite Each Verse

Now that you’ve written everything you know about your text, the **third step** of interpretation is to summarize your understanding by rewriting each verse in your own words. This is like writing your personal paraphrase of the text. This step forces you to express your understanding in a concise manner.

## Determine Main Idea

The **fourth step** of interpretation is to determine the main idea of the section. Every passage has a main idea, the central truth that the author was communicating to his recipients. If we have interpreted our section well, we can discern this main idea. This main idea is very important, because application flows from the main idea. We use the following steps to discern the main idea:

1. List the author and recipients of the book.
2. Look through the section, find all the themes, and write them out. These may be words in the section or words that summarize what’s going on in the section.
3. From the list of themes, determine which is the dominant theme. The dominant theme will cover all of the section (not just part of it) and will receive more explanation than any other theme. It might be a summary or compilation of other themes.
4. Looking at the dominant theme and at the other themes, determine how the author limits the scope of the dominant theme, which is called the theme limiter. Often the dominant theme is huge in scope (e.g., faith, love, obedience), but typically an author only deals with one specific aspect of it. One or more of the subordinate themes often give clues on how the author limits the scope of the dominant theme.

5. Write out the main idea as a clear and comprehensive one-sentence statement that summarizes the dominant theme as limited by the theme limiter. Write it in the past tense, include historical elements associated with the text, and anchor it to the author's intent. Write it in the following form:

*(Author) wrote (our section) in order to (some action verb) (recipients) (dominant theme and theme limiter).*

Here are some examples:

1. Paul wrote Galatians 4:12-20 in order to plead with Galatian believers to stay free in Christ.
2. Paul wrote Ephesians 4:1-6 to order to exhort believers in Ephesus to live a life worthy of their calling.
3. Paul wrote Philippians 1:9-11 in order to teach the Philippian church how to pray for love to abound in their lives.

The main idea should be specific not vague. It should be unique to this passage; that is, it should not be re-usable with any other passage in the Bible. It should cover the entire passage, not just part of it.

### Practice

Work together through the main idea for 1 Pt 2:1-3.

### Consider The Gospel

The **fifth and final step** of interpretation is to consider the gospel. On the road to Emmaus, Jesus began with Moses and the prophets and explained to his disciples the things concerning himself in all the Scriptures (Luke 24:27). The focal point of the entire Bible is God's plan of redemption through the death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus, which brings the Father glory. This means that every section in the Bible has some relationship to this grand theme of redemption through the gospel. To consider how your section relates to the gospel, answer these three questions:

1. What does this text teach you about yourself, a person who needs redemption through the gospel? What need or deficiency in your life does it expose?
2. And what does this text teach you about the character of God, the one who provides redemption through the gospel? How does it reveal God's grace to meet your need?
3. How does this text relate to the gospel? Does it look ahead to the gospel, describe the gospel itself, or result from the gospel?