

Basics for Reading the Bible

by John Piper

This sermon delves into the historical context of 1 Peter, likely written during a time of intense persecution under Nero, shedding light on the impending fiery ordeal faced by early Christians. It emphasizes the importance of understanding the author's intentions, the role of inspiration by the Holy Spirit, and the need for both critical thinking and spiritual dependence in interpreting Scripture.

Scripture: 1 Peter 4:12, 2 Peter 1:20, John 16:13, 2 Corinthians 4:6, 2 Timothy 2:7

Topics: "Perseverance in Persecution", "The Role of the Holy Spirit in Scripture"

Description

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Transcript

I said a few minutes ago that the ISIS murders were not quite what we have in 1st Peter. Here's the reason I said that. It says, don't be surprised brothers when the fiery ordeal comes upon you.

It's not there yet, which has a lot to say about when this book was probably written, and I'll tell you what most scholars think, at least most evangelical scholars. Liberals tend to think Peter didn't write it and it's way later at the end of the first century or beginning of the second century, but the vast number of scholars would say Peter wrote this. Tradition from Eusebius says that Peter was crucified under Nero in a conflagration against Christians that happened sometime late AD 64 to early 65.

The reason we know it is because Rome almost burned to the ground in July of AD 64. The population suspected Nero set the fire so that he could rebuild a more glorious Rome. To escape that accusation, he scapegoated the Christians.

Sometime late 64, early 65, and you've heard the stories, crucified some upside down, poured oil over some, put them on poles, and lit the city with them as they burned alive. It was a horrible, horrible persecution, broke and spread, and Peter was evidently, if the tradition is right, killed in that persecution, which means he could smell it coming probably, and that's why 1st Peter sounds the way it sounds. 1st Peter, when you read it, it doesn't look like there is wholesale civil persecution, like coming down from the Emperor or coming down from the governors.

It doesn't look that way. You'll see as we as we move through, it's just right there. It's in the structures, the hostilities brewing, and now it's about to come, the fiery ordeal that is about to come upon you.

So that's probably the setting. Peter is probably in Rome when he's writing it, because at the end it says, she who is in Babylon, your sister greets you, Babylon, code word for Rome. We know that because it's used half a dozen times in Revelation that way, and so we orient this book, mid 60s, Apostle Peter in Rome on the brink of the first and most horrible persecution from the Roman Empire.

I think now we're ready for some talk about method. Yeah, so let's do that. This is mainly an effort in defining terms so that when I use them, you'll know what I'm talking about, and giving some rationale for those definitions.

So the first word I want to define the meaning of is meaning. So even in the saying of it, I'm assuming you know what I mean, but you probably don't all know what I mean by meaning. And you don't have to buy my definition.

What you need to do if you're in a small group or in a family and you're using the word, you need to make clear what you mean by meaning. Because if you don't mean what I mean, you have another meaning, and people ought to know what that is. That's called honesty.

I hate it when people use words with the desire that people don't know what they mean. That's very common today. I feel so strongly about this, that we should be people of the truth, people of absolute integrity.

What you see is what you get. Did I say that backwards? Get what you see. You know what I mean.

Here's the illustration. Years ago, a friend of mine was a pastor who was preaching through Romans, and he got to Romans 9. Romans 9 is a hard chapter, a hard chapter on the sovereignty of God. Jacob I loved, Esau I hated, things like that.

And he told me that he went to a denominational official and expressed his apprehension about preaching through Romans 9 in his church, and the denominational official said, oh, there's a way to preach Romans 9 so that the people don't know what you think. I could not believe that. I was furious.

That's wicked. That is wicked. That's hellish.

The devil talks like that. Say something to create a nice cover so everybody's happy. Happy, happy, happy.

Give, give, give money to my church. Grow, grow, grow. Just don't know what I think, because you might not like it.

So you can tell how I feel about this. If you use the word meaning, you should know what you mean by the word meaning. So I'm going to put it right out there what I mean, and then we've got agreement.

I mean, we got understanding, which is the second word I'm going to try to define. Meaning. Biblical authors have intentions which they aim to communicate.

That is their meaning. Authors have intentions that they want to communicate. That's their meaning.

So my meaning, as I talk to you, is intentions in my head that I want you to know. Agreement is way down the line. We have agreement that's way down the line.

I just want you to know what I intend to communicate. That's my meaning, and Peter's meaning. So when I ask, what does this text mean? I don't mean, so here's my little not, therefore the meaning of a text is not everything that comes into your mind when you read it.

So when you're leading a small group, this is just huge, because the average small group, again I don't know Canada, so you may be way ahead of us, but the average small group that I have dealt with over the years, if you throw out, what do you think this means? People just say whatever comes to their head. It almost has no necessary correlation to the words on the page, or the meaning of those words, or the connection between those words. I feel that when I, it doesn't refer to how we feel about what's in the text.

Feeling about what's in the text is the difference between heaven and hell. So don't hear me making light of feelings. How you feel about what's in the text matters.

It's just not meaning. All right, we're going to keep things clear. Meaning is not how you feel.

Third, it's not how you apply it. Getting the meaning right will make sure that when you apply it, you're not misapplying it. There is such a thing as misapplying a text, right? Well, how would you know if you were misapplying a text? And one of the answers is, you didn't get the meaning.

And so you're applying what isn't there. So those three nots, it's not everything that comes into your head, it's not what you feel, it's not what you do with a text. Meaning is what the author intended to communicate.

Now, I'm not saying that's the way everybody in the world uses the word meaning. That's the way John Piper uses the word meaning in this room tonight, and tomorrow, probably till I die. I'm not asking you to agree.

Well, I will ask you to agree, because I think that's a good definition. But you don't need to agree to profit from what we're doing, because you just need to understand. Let's go to understand.

So what's the meaning of that word right there? What do you mean by the word understand? Thinking an author's intentions, his meaning, after him is the goal of understanding. So here's somebody talking to me, and out of their mouth is coming words with intentions to communicate, and I'm here receiving those words, and if I can track their intentions through their words, I'll understand them. It's wonderful.

Isn't that amazing that humans can do this? Animals can a little bit. Not very complicated. You know, the feathers go like this.

It means I'm ready to have sex. But we do it way complicated with words, so I can put words on my tongue coming from my brain with its intentions, and those words go in your ear. They trigger things in your head, and you can actually follow a train of thought that was in my head, and we call that understanding.

It's awesome. And guess what? This book assumes that can happen across the centuries. Otherwise, we're just blowing smoke.

We have understood an author's meaning when we have construed his words so as to define what he intended. The best test of whether you've understood someone is to say back to them what you heard

them say and have them say, yes, that's right. And my, oh my, would we make headway in public conversation if that happens? It almost never happens, especially in political debate and dialogue.

Never. And many of our talk show stuff in the United States is designed to keep it from happening. We're gonna, we're not gonna pause and say, now did you get, did I understand you to mean, it's too nuanced, it's too technical, it takes too much time, it's not designed for sound bites.

Our whole culture is built around a kind of communication that makes this sort of thing very difficult, hence we sit in a room for an hour and a half tonight and four or five hours tomorrow laboring, it is hard work, it's very hard work, to try to get inside another person's mind and construe their thoughts. So that's what I mean by understanding and meaning. Now, let's complexify things a little bit.

I don't even know that's a word, but you know what it means. I, you, you can do that. You can create words in context so that others, never having heard the word, you've heard that one, but never having heard the word, you know what it means, because you know what I intend for you to get by.

Let's, let's make this more complicated. Inspiration is now another author. You got Peter, and you got God, right? And we believe, I believe, Norm believes, Peter's not just winging it when he writes, he is being led by the Spirit.

That's the way he talks about it. So here's what he says, this is 2nd Peter, not 1st Peter, 1, 2021, this is the way Peter understands Old Testament inspiration of Scripture. You know this, first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Spirit.

So prophecy didn't just come up out of Isaiah's assessment of the situation and his interpretation. Rather, Isaiah and Jeremiah and all the biblical authors were carried along by the Holy Spirit. Now what makes it complicated is that God is not dictating in such a way that they all have exactly the same style called God's style.

So if I were to dictate a letter, it doesn't matter how many secretaries there were, it would sound the same, because they'd be writing in my style. That's not the way God inspired the Bible. You know it's not, because Peter and John and Paul read very differently.

Their styles are different, and their vocabulary is different. God didn't do it that way. He guided them, which is why I put such a high premium on human author intention.

God didn't bypass the intentionality. When Paul's writing, or Peter's writing, or John is writing, they really are thinking. They really are intending to put words together in a certain way with Greek in the case of the New Testament, so that another person who can share the language conventions can know their intentions.

But they are aware, I'll argue that in just a minute, they are aware. God's at work in their life and guarding them from error and guiding them into truth. So don't hear me deny God's intentionality or God's inspiration when I put the stress on understanding a book or a sentence from 1st Peter is thinking Peter's thoughts after him, because I think God so worked that Peter's thoughts in the writing of that book were God's thoughts.

I'm not going to do an end run around Peter to God. I'm not going to read this and say, well God told me what he meant was, and it doesn't look at all what's on the page. That's not fair.

You can't play that way. Then you become God. We get to God through the human grammar and syntax, and what a glory shines when we do.

Okay, so there's... continue. Here's Jesus. Now I said that was Peter's view of Old Testament inspiration, Old Testament.

How do we get to New Testament inspiration? Jesus is the link between Old and New Testament. I just wrote a book on this. I took the last seven weeks or so and wrote a big fat book on how the Bible shows itself to be completely truthful.

So I've been thinking a lot about this recently. Here's Jesus forging the link between his affirmation of the Old Testament cannot be broken, he said. He vouched entirely for the Old Testament that we have, and there are reasons I say that, and then he knew that a new people of God was coming into being.

This new people of God would be a people of the book, just like the old people were, but it'll be a book plus. Well, how would that come into being? I mean this book he vouched for totally and says that cannot be broken. Would he then give to his church a book full of things that can be broken? And here's what he says in John 16, I still have many things to say to you.

You cannot bear them now, but the Spirit of truth, when the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth. For he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak. He hears from the Father, and he will declare to you things that are to come.

He will glorify me. That's why the New Testament has Jesus at the center. For he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

All that the Father has is mine, therefore I said he will take what is mine and declare it to you. I think that's Jesus' way of telling the apostles, I am going to see to it that the apostles and the prophets provide a foundation, Ephesians 2 20, provide a foundation on which my church can be built for, and then he didn't tell them how long, for the duration until I come back, and you men will write the foundation, and when you're gone and those documents are gathered, it's over. We don't we don't enlarge the canon, you're it.

Here is an example of it happening in Paul, 1 Corinthians 2, the example of what Jesus just prophesied. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given to us by God, and we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom, but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual. The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him.

He is not able to understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by none. I'll tell you what I think that last verse means.

The word there, judge, I think means assess properly. The spiritual person assesses things properly, but those who are not spiritual, but is himself to be assessed properly by no one. If you don't have the Holy Spirit, and you're looking in on Christianity, you just won't get it, it won't make sense, it will be strange, and therefore they won't form judgments that are suitable, true.

So there I think, especially right here, is Paul saying, I am now experiencing, as I teach, words taught, guided by the Holy Spirit. Now, let me show you why I'm choosing these verses. So really it's huge, isn't it? The natural person here does not accept the things of the Spirit of God.

So the natural person, what's that? Who's that? That's the person without the Holy Spirit. Just what you are by nature. First birth, not second birth.

That person does not accept the things of the Spirit, for they are folly to him. They're folly to him. He's not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.

So that's huge. I mean, here I am talking to you, and I'm saying that if you are not a spiritual person, if you're just a natural person, then the things I'm going to be saying will be folly, they won't be understood properly, they can't be discerned. What does that mean? How do you become the kind of person who could profit from this seminar? And that's why I go to these couple of texts.

And this is the last slide on method. Let me get into 1st Peter. 2nd Corinthians 4.6. God who said, let light shine out of darkness, has shown in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

That I think is a description of what happens in the spiritual person. It's the difference between natural and spiritual. In the natural person, verse 4, I didn't include it here, but verse 4 of chapter 4 says, the God of this world has blinded the minds of unbelievers to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

So, blinders. You hear the gospel preached, you hear John Piper talk, and there's no light of the glory of Christ coming through. It's just boring, interesting, not compelling, not life-changing.

But verse 6 says what changes. The God who at the beginning in Genesis 1 said, let light shine out of darkness, has done the same thing. This is called the new creation or the new birth.

He has shown in our hearts. What does that mean? To give the light. Now that's not light like these lights are shining in my face right now.

It's not that. It's heart light. We need to understand what he means.

Whoa, light that is not produced by the Sun, it's not produced by electricity, it's produced by God's voice through the Scriptures in my heart, a light of the knowledge. Oh, I see, so it's light shining in and through knowledge of the glory of God that's bright in the face of Jesus Christ. Let me see if I can tell you what I think that that means.

This is not our focus, this is just method. You're reading the gospel, the story of Christ's death for sinners, his resurrection from the dead, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the transformation at work, the wonderful forgiveness of sins, have a right standing with God by faith alone. You're reading that one day and it is utterly uninteresting, boring.

You just want to get the TV on, get to the ball game, just get on with life and just this is so boring. And then late that night you thought for some strange impulse you'd pull it off the shelf again. You sit on the edge of your bed, you open it up, not only is it not boring anymore, it is the most beautiful thing you've ever seen in your life.

He loved me and gave himself for me. He came from infinite pleasure and dignity and honor and power and was slaughtered for his enemies, including me, and he offers total forgiveness for my sins, total escape from hell, total removal of his wrath, total inheritance of the world and joy forever, freely, and you're in for the rest of your life. Well, what happened? What happened? This happened.

Verse 6 happened. That's a miracle. I can't make it happen in this room.

God can. I pray that it will happen. If you're there and you find the Bible boring, mythological, distracting, you'd like right now just to walk out, my prayer is that verse 6 will happen.

God shines in the heart with light, a spiritual light that's just as bright and self-evidencing as if you were to ask me, how do you know that light right there is just about to blind you? It makes me see little yellow dots over here and over here. How do you know that? I said, well, I see it. I see it.

And if you put a gun to my head and said, well, it's not really there, so say it's not there. I might lie to save my life, but it's there. I hope I wouldn't lie about the spiritual light.

That light doesn't matter. Jesus matters infinitely. The light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

By face of Jesus Christ, I think that means you're reading the story and his person, you see him. That's why you should be reading the Gospels pretty much every day. Not a rule, just Jesus shines out from his words and actions in history.

Okay, one last methodological verse. 2nd Timothy 2 7. So here we are, right here. Paul says to Timothy, think over what I say, for, one of the most important words in the Bible, the Lord will give you understanding in everything.

I love those two phrases, and I love the way they're related. The first one says, put on your thinking cap as you read my words, Timothy. I, Peter said about Paul in 2nd Peter, Paul wrote some things, many of which are hard, some of which are hard to understand, and people twist them to their own destruction.

I don't want to be a twister, so put on, think over what I say. Now that's an endorsement of scholarship. It's an endorsement of teaching children how to read, and then teaching them in high school how to read better, and then teaching them in college how to read really, really, really well, and then graduate students ought to be best readers as well.

All education is is learning how to read the world, the world in the Word. So this is an endorsement of why everywhere that Christianity has spread in the world, what sprang up? Three things. Churches, schools, and hospitals.

That's everywhere you go. That's what sprang up in the history of the church, because we are people of the book. If you don't go to school to learn how to read, this remains closed.

So schools have to be taught. You have to teach people how to read, think, process information, and hospitals, if they're dead, they can't read, and if they're real sick, they can't read, right? We do unto others as you'd have them do unto you. I don't like being sick, so I like hospitals, and medicine, and miracles.

Four, think, think, think, think, think. Four, the Lord will give. So many people split these up and become one or the other, right? I'm a thinking type.

I'm an academic. I'm a scholar. I don't need any of that mumbo-jumbo spiritual stuff that he comes, he shows up.

God is miraculously real and present and opens your mind and shows you things. I don't want that. I'm a student.

I'm a thinker, or you're one of these hyper-super-duper non-thinking types. I don't want to use any words that might offend you. I don't care too much about offending you, but unnecessarily.

So, the non-thinking types, whatever you call them here, they don't think, and they just pray. Show me, show me, show me, show me. Open their Bible, get an idea, meaning wrong.

So, so here's the beauty, here's the beauty. Paul says to us, Piper, think. Spend the last two days pouring out your life, 14 hours a day, getting ready for this seminar.

Think, think, think. Figure it out. What did he mean? Because through your thinking, I work, and if I didn't, you'd have nothing worth saying.

Isn't that what that four means right there? Get a new color, sweetie. That four right there, that's what that means. Think because I give.

Think because I give. Think because I give understanding in everything. I give the understanding, you do the thinking, I give, so you get a big head.

If you saw anything, I did that for you. If you felt anything appropriate, if you worship, if you started the way first Peter started, blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus, if your heart leapt up with, bless you, bless you for my new birth and for the resurrection of Jesus and for my inheritance that is unfading, bless you. If that happened here, I did that.

You didn't do that by thinking. Zillions of people think and never worship, never feel anything appropriate when they read the Bible. Why? God didn't show up.

They didn't look for him to show up, they didn't lean on, they didn't ask him to show up. When I'm reading my Bible, I'm doing two things, thinking like crazy and praying like crazy. God help me, please don't leave me to myself.

One of my favorite verses in first Peter, we won't even get there I'm sure, so I'll give it to you now. I probably in in the little prayer room downstairs like down here before I went up to preach for 30 years plus, the verse that probably I quoted more than any other verse to get myself ready was first Peter 4 11 which says, let him who serves, this is just half of it, let him who speaks speaketh the very words of God, but this is the part, let him who serves serve in the strength that God supplies so that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ to him belong dominion forever. Let him who serves serve in the strength that God supplies.

So I was preaching to myself, okay, I have to speak. It's what preaching is. I'm speaking.

I wave my hands up and down like this. I stand up, put my legs under me. I think.

I look at my notes. I do all that. Human, human, human, human.

And oh God, I'm doing it so far as I am able in the strength that you supply so that the giver will get the glory. Help me to lean on you and not my own understanding. So both.

It's both. That verse right there is really, really important for method in Bible study. If you're a pastor, if you're a Sunday school teacher, if you're a small group leader, build those two things into your people.

Tell them we're gonna be thinking people and tell them we're gonna be desperately dependent people. We're gonna be praying like crazy. We're gonna invite the Holy Spirit to come and if he doesn't come, the intransigent problems in these people's lives will never be changed by thinking.

Never. You got marriage issues, you got kid issues, you got health issues, you got psychological issues, drug issues, food disorder issues, got massive deep-rooted abuse issues. Thinking? That won't do it.

But neither will mere praying without thinking over this book. Okay, enough on method. I think you can get the sense meaning is what Peter intends.

Understanding is when we can follow that intention through his words. Inspiration is the guidance of those words by the Holy Spirit so that when we get his intention, we've got God's intention, and then spiritual interpretation is when the Holy Spirit comes in and makes us able to see the beauty of it all so that we worship, and we do it both with thinking and with dependence on God.

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