

## Session 2: Obstacles to an Immediate Understanding of God's Purpose

**Summary of Lesson 1:** God has never said anything without aiming for change in the lives of those hearing his Word. God has always had a clear purpose for His Word, and the meaning of the text is that purpose.

I want to consider with you the many obstacles to an immediate understanding of God's purpose so that we can see that we need the principles of hermeneutics and the methods of exegesis to overcome these obstacles. For God's Word can and often is misinterpreted. In **John 21:18-23** we have an example of this.

<sup>18</sup> Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go." <sup>19</sup> Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, "Follow me!" <sup>20</sup> Peter turned and saw that the disciple whom Jesus loved was following them. (This was the one who had leaned back against Jesus at the supper and had said, "Lord, who is going to betray you?") <sup>21</sup> When Peter saw him, he asked, "Lord, what about him?" <sup>22</sup> Jesus answered, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me." <sup>23</sup> Because of this, the rumor spread among the believers that this disciple would not die. But Jesus did not say that he would not die; he only said, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you?" (Jn. 21:18-23 NIV)

Jesus did not tell Peter that the apostle John would not die before Jesus returns, but "What is it to you if I want him to remain until I come?" But this rumor was spread on the basis of this statement, so John had to dispel it, so that after his death, the brothers and sisters in the Lord would not get the idea that Jesus was lying.

Here it is clear that even during the lifetime of the apostles, false conclusions were drawn based on the Word of God. The same thing happens today because we insufficiently perceive the obstacles to an immediate understanding.

I want to give three reasons why we need the principles of hermeneutics and the methods of exegesis.

### The first reason:

We need the principles of hermeneutics because the Word of God, if misinterpreted, is no longer the Word of God, but a word from men. The seriousness with which we should approach the task of interpreting the Bible is clearly seen in James 3:1: "**Do not become many teachers, my brothers, knowing that we will receive a stricter judgment!**"

Bernard Ramm sums up well the seriousness of this task:

Establishing what God has said is a high and holy task. With fear and trembling, everyone should pay attention to what he has adopted as a method of Bible interpretation. On the correct interpretation of the Bible rests our teaching on salvation, sanctification, eschatology [i.e., the future events of the end times], and the Christian life. It is our sacred obligation to know what God has said about these things. But we can do this only if we have carefully, thoroughly, and

orderly formulated such a system for interpreting the Bible that will reflect as easily as possible the original meaning of the Bible.

We must also know the correct method of Bible interpretation so that we do not confuse the voice of God with the voice of men. At any point where our interpretation is faulty, we have used a human voice instead of the voice of God. We must know hermeneutics thoroughly, if for no other reason than to guard against the folly and errors of faulty principles in understanding God's Word.

That there are those who mishandle the Scriptures we see from the many warnings in Scripture:

<sup>6</sup> Some have departed from these and have turned to meaningless talk. <sup>7</sup> They want to be teachers of the law, but they do not know what they are talking about or what they so confidently affirm. (1 Tim. 1:6-7 NIV)

<sup>10</sup> For there are many rebellious people, full of meaningless talk and deception, especially those of the circumcision group. <sup>11</sup> They must be silenced, because they are disrupting whole households by teaching things they ought not to teach-- and that for the sake of dishonest gain. (Tit. 1:10-11 NIV)

But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them-- bringing swift destruction on themselves. (2 Pet. 2:1 NIV)

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: <sup>2</sup> Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage-- with great patience and careful instruction. <sup>3</sup> For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. <sup>4</sup> They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. (2 Tim. 4:1-4 NIV)

In both his letters to Timothy, Paul exhorts Timothy to guard the beautiful deposit of sound doctrine:

<sup>20</sup> Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to your care. Turn away from godless chatter and the opposing ideas of what is falsely called knowledge, <sup>21</sup> which some have professed and in so doing have departed from the faith. Grace be with you all. (1 Tim. 6:20-21 NIV)

<sup>13</sup> What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus. <sup>14</sup> Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you-- guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us. (2 Tim. 1:13-14 NIV)

The context in 2Timothy makes clear what the entrusted deposit is. It is the gospel that was entrusted to Paul by Jesus (1Tim. 1:11) and for which Timothy is to suffer together with him (2Tim. 1:8). The entrusted deposit is defined in 2Tim. 2:13 as the "pattern of sound doctrine". In a nutshell, the entrusted deposit is the sound doctrine of Jesus Christ, which He entrusted to His holy apostles and which they are to entrust to others (2Tim. 2:2). The Greek word for "being healthy" is ὑγιαίνω (hygianino). This word also occurs as an adjective or noun and reminds us of the English word "hygiene." This word is used eight times in the Pastoral Epistles, either to emphasize sound or wholesome doctrine, or also to describe people who are sound in faith because of sound doctrine. Here are a few examples:

- If anyone teaches otherwise and does not turn to the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that is according to godliness, (1 Tim. 6:3)

- Hold fast the example of the sound words which you have heard from me, in faith and love which are in Christ Jesus! (2Tim 1:13)
- For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own lusts will heap up for themselves teachers, because it tickles their ears; (2Tim 4:3)
- ...who holds to the reliable word according to doctrine, that he may be able both to exhort with sound doctrine and to convict the gainsayers. (Titus 1:9)
- This testimony is true. For this reason rebuke them severely, so that they may be sound in the faith (Titus 1:13).
- But you speak what befits sound doctrine: (Titus 2:1)
- ...that the men of old may be sober, honorable, prudent, sound in faith, in love, in perseverance; (Titus 2:2)

Paul did not emphasize church growth strategies to Timothy and Titus, but a guarding of the pattern of sound doctrines. **We cannot preserve this sound teaching of the apostles of Jesus Christ until we ourselves have received it.** This requires that we have dealt with their thought process in their letters in such a way that we have understood the good deposit entrusted to the apostles.

#### **The second reason we need the principles of Hermeneutics:**

We need hermeneutics also because of the many obstacles to an immediate understanding of the Bible. Again, Bernard Ramm has hit the point well:

The second great need for hermeneutics is to bridge the gap between our thinking and that of the biblical authors. People of the same culture, the same age, and the same geographical region understand each other with ease. Patterns of meaning and understanding begin with childhood and early language behavior, and by the time one reaches adulthood, the principles of understanding and interpretation have become so axiomatic that we are unaware of them.

In our own culture and environment, we are constantly interpreting the statements of others unconsciously. When a boy in Germany says to his friend, "Hast du das gepeilt?" the friend understands it to mean, "Did you understand that?" As an American, I have to consciously interpret the statements of others in Germany because many idioms are foreign to me. The first time I was told, "If you leave your bike there, you'll have two afterwards," I was really confused. It was then explained to me that this was a sarcastic saying, emphasizing the possibility that the object could be stolen.

When we pick up the Bible, we must make an effort to interpret what is written from the point of view of the human author at the time of writing. Again, the words of Bernard Ramm serve us well here:

But when the interpreter is separated culturally, historically, and geographically from the author he wishes to interpret, the task of interpretation is no longer easy. The greater the cultural, historical and geographical differences, the more difficult is the task of interpretation. When reading the Bible, we are suddenly confronted with a book that differs in many ways from what we are used to.

Differences or deviations with which the interpreter must deal are:

FOUR “GAPS” THE INTERPRETER MUST BRIDGE			
Language/Literature	Culture	Geography	History

**Language:** The Bible was originally written in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. The task of translators is very difficult for two reasons. First, languages have different structure or composition. Ramm summarizes this point well:

So you can change the order in a Greek sentence in two or three different ways and still get the same meaning, because the meaning basically depends not on the word order but on the word endings. Translating from Greek into English does not consist in the easy task of finding an English word for every Greek word. The translator must navigate back and forth between languages that are different in structure. He has the difficult task of finding equivalents in the German verb system for forms of the Greek verb system."

Ramm continues by also explaining to us the second reason why this task is difficult:

It is also not easy to find words in English that correspond as closely as possible to the corresponding word in the Hebrew or Greek text. Each word is a small reservoir full of different meanings. Here, too, the knowledge and judgment of the wisest scholars is sorely tested in trying to discern from this vast array the meaning intended in a given phrase, and then in trying to assign to it a particular word from the English language, itself a reservoir of meanings.

**Culture, customs and traditions:** When we travel abroad today, we encounter a different culture. When I was a missionary in the Philippines, I made many mistakes because I did not understand some customs. For example, if two Filipinos are talking to each other in the hallway of a building, you should not walk between them if possible. If it is not possible otherwise, then you have to bend slightly and put your hand in front of you and pass between them without saying anything. If you don't know this, you look cheeky and ill-bred. It is the same with us and the culture of the Bible. Every section of the Bible was written in a culture and to a culture that is foreign to us. For this reason, we want to take into account the customs and traditions of the current culture when interpreting it. Ramm wrote the following about this:

Many points in the parables of our Lord are taken from the customs and manners of the people of His day, and a better understanding of the parables is dependent upon knowledge of the Jewish culture of that century. A knowledge of marriage customs, economic practices, military systems, legal systems, agricultural methods, etc. is very helpful in interpreting the Scriptures.

**Geography:** The geography of the Bible sets the stage for God's activity and action. Sometimes we can gain insight into biblical events by better understanding the landscape. We find an example in the Letter to the Romans. Paul wrote the Letter to the Romans when he was in Corinth. At the beginning and conclusion of the Letter to the Romans, Paul emphasizes why he did not make it all the way to Rome (Romans 1:8-15; 15:14-33).

Paul explains that he has a strong desire to visit the brethren in Rome and has often pleaded with God to allow him to travel to Rome. The brethren in Rome must have learned that Paul preached the gospel as far as Illyria (northern Greece). Since Illyria was very close to Rome, they must have expected or hoped for a visit from Paul. Therefore Paul wants to explain to them why he is now on his way back to Jerusalem instead of visiting them.

A look at the map shows us how faithful Paul was. Instead of fulfilling his own desire and visiting the brethren in Rome, he turns around and travels over 1,500 kilometers in the opposite direction so that he can accompany the donation from the Gentiles to the needy Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. Paul knew that God had entrusted him with the task of breaking down the wall of enmity between Jewish and Gentile Christians. Paul knew the importance of presenting this gift to the Jewish Christians in order to promote peace between Jewish and Gentile Christians. When we consider how long Paul longed to see the brothers and sisters in the faith and his relatives in Rome, and then see on the map how close Paul came to Rome, we can see from this how seriously he took God's calling in his life.

We gain from this a good application in the present time: as a Christian, I must now and then put my desires aside so that the will of God may be done. This application is difficult to gain from the text if we are not aware of the distance that is between Rome, Paul at the time of writing, and Jerusalem. However, I would also like to give a warning at this point. Some people love details. They like to do research. And they tend to get lost in the incidentals, emphasizing what is just the "stage" (i.e., location of the event) and not necessarily the message. An understanding of the landscape adds more color to the event, so that we can better imagine, for example, the sacrifice with which Paul and his companions proclaimed the gospel on their missionary journeys. In the above example from the Letter to the Romans, Paul is primarily soliciting understanding of his decision to travel to Jerusalem instead of visiting the recipients of the letter in Rome. Furthermore, Paul wanted to promote unity between Jewish and Gentile Christians in Rome by setting before them the example of the Gentile Christians from Macedonia and Achaia, who expressed their love for their brothers and sisters in Christ in Jerusalem through financial support.

To sum up, the "stage" of the events is not central, but often contributes to a better understanding of the text.

**Historical distance:** Centuries separate interpreters today from the historical backgrounds of the Bible.

The stories about the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well and about the Good Samaritan are difficult to understand without knowing the historical development of the enmity that existed between Jews and Samaritans. Without this knowledge, the Great Commission in Acts 1:8 is also difficult to understand. Here Jesus explicitly mentions the land of Samaria and then the whole world in addition to the city of Jerusalem and the land of Judea. Obviously, it was important that the Jews not avoid preaching the gospel to their enemies, the Samaritans. According to Acts 8, it was only because of persecution that the Jews preached the gospel to the Samaritans.

### **The third reason**

We need the principles of hermeneutics also because of the numerous obstacles to an immediate understanding of the biblical text within the interpreter himself.

1. Differences in worldview: the way we view our world today is very different from the way people in the various biblical times viewed reality.

Sociologist Harold Garfinkle said, "We are like a goldfish in a bowl looking at a goldfish in another bowl." This means that the problem of the gap between us and the recipients of God's Word at that time is greater than we often realize. This is because each of us wears glasses that strongly influence us when we read the Bible. We already have an idea of God and what He must be like. We are not neutral as readers or interpreters. Our feelings and thoughts influence our objectivity, so we need the principles of hermeneutics to be more objective. The following quote from McQuilken shows how our basic assumptions affect our ability to read the Bible objectively. The following quote from McQuilken includes a quote from Ernest Best:

The basic assumption with regard to the Bible-and this also distinguishes believers from unbelievers-is that the Bible is God's revelation about Himself and about His will for man. Although unity prevails here among Christians, the implications of this statement are viewed differently. It is important to understand these different approaches because a person's basic assumptions will, by and large, determine how he understands and interprets the Scriptures. One author explained this in the following way:

We must know ourselves.... Each of us views the Bible with his or her own basic assumptions. These are part of our worldview, part of our personal theology. How we view the Scriptures depends primarily on them. Does it consist of infallible statements? Is the Bible the record of sure acts of God? Is it an inspired record? Are there revelations apart from the Scriptures? Our views in this area will determine how we treat the text. Our senses or minds are not empty when we read or hear Scripture; what we hear is already partially predetermined by what is already in our minds; our basic assumptions shape our understanding of what we hear. It is not necessary to argue for a particular set of basic assumptions in this context, but it is necessary to insist that we perceive and know our own list of basic assumptions. Then, when we seek to understand and interpret, we should know how we are influenced by them. Ernest Best, From Text to Sermon: Responsible Use of the New Testament in Preaching (Atlanta: John Knox, 1978), pp. 97-99)

2. **Laziness:** Some Christians are simply not willing to read the Bible carefully.

They are not willing to pay the attention necessary to understand God's written Word as God meant it. They are not willing to go through healthy steps of interpretation before coming to a firm conviction regarding the meaning of a Bible passage. Before we can say "Thus says the Lord!" we are to read through a book of the Bible several times, watching for repeated words or themes within the book. We are also to compare the introduction of the book with the conclusion. We are to pay attention to the questions asked in the text. We are to familiarize ourselves with the main purpose of the Holy Spirit-inspired writer before we begin interpreting individual passages. Those who are not willing to make this effort can very quickly arrive at wrong interpretations of the Bible.

In our church, for this reason, we had to establish some rules for participating in sharing about the Bible in our home group. At the time, we looked together at a letter in the New Testament, and at each meeting a particular passage served as the basis for the sharing. We have had participants who have not even read the passage beforehand, but wanted to share their impressions of the text with everyone.

Often their impressions were even the opposite of what the inspired writer had on his mind. Then we, as leaders of the home group, had to correct their wrong statements about the text as tactfully as possible, because we could not let these wrong impressions about the meaning or application of the text stand in the room.

We then established as a requirement for active participation in the conversation that each participant must read the text several times during the week. It is a sad fact that many Christians have learned the application of principles and procedures but do not make use of them and instead let them gather dust.

3. **Pride:** there are always Christians who have an unteachable spirit.

Their goal is to defend what they already believe. They are unwilling to admit their own errors in interpretation or to listen when other Christians try to correct them from Scripture.

Those who are honest will admit that it is difficult to listen to other doctrinal beliefs when they are convinced of their own understanding of Scripture. If the biblical support for our doctrinal convictions is weaker than we first thought, we need humility to admit it.

4. **Ignorance:** Paul bore witness to the Jews that they had zeal for God, but also that this zeal was without knowledge (Romans 10:2).

It is good to be zealous for God, but not if you are wrong. In Proverbs 19:2, we read "Without knowledge even zeal is not good; and he who is hasty with his feet missteps." Theological blinders prevent us from coming to the knowledge of the truth. Before his conversion, Paul was just as ignorant of God's prophesies that the Messiah would suffer as the rest of the Pharisees. Zeal without right knowledge is spiritual blindness.

5. **Lack of education:** For some Christians, educational obstacles are the problem.

They cannot read well or lack understanding of the rules of grammar. I have often tried to help brothers and sisters in the Lord who have misinterpreted and misapplied a Bible passage because they did not pay attention to grammar. The following Bible passage serves as an example of this:

And do not conform yourselves to this course of the world, but be transformed in your nature by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God. (Rom. 12:2)

Paul describes the will of God in this verse as "good," "pleasing," and "perfect." However, I know believers who claim that this passage speaks of three different categories of Christians. There are, according to this false interpretation, Christians who are "good." They are born again, but have only been baptized with water. There is then the second level of Christians who are "well-pleasing." They are supposedly baptized with the Holy Spirit and with water. Then, according to this false interpretation, there is a third level of Christians. These are those who are "perfect." These are supposedly baptized with fire.

If we would pay attention to the grammar in the original scripture and in the English translations, we would see that this interpretation is not possible, because it is not three categories of Christians that are

described, but the one will of God. God's will is all three: good, pleasing and perfect. These are three adjectives that describe the one will of God. Lack of education can lead to wrong interpretations.

6. **Fear of man:** Fear of man robs us of the ability to stand alone or swim against the tide of popular theology.

Fear of man leads to the spiritual position that a person is more concerned about what Christianity thinks about him than what God thinks.

There are fixed doctrinal beliefs among Baptists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Methodists, Brethren churches, etc., that are established in their circles. When you are confronted with other doctrinal beliefs that are not tolerated in your home church, the fear of possible exclusion from your home church can be a barrier to objectivity.

**Summary:** Ultimately, hermeneutics is about providing the means and tools for the interpreter to overcome these obstacles. There are obstacles outside of us as well as within us. We are not as objective in our consideration of biblical truths as we would like to be. The principles of hermeneutics will help us overcome these obstacles.