FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

BIBLIOLOGY

The Doctrine of the Word of God

UNIT 9: THE INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE

Lesson 19

HERMENEUTICS — THE SCIENCE AND ART OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

Reading the Bible Rightly

Key Texts: 2 Timothy 2:15; Nehemiah 8:8

> *"All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work."*
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> **2 Timothy 3:16–17, NASB 1995**

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Introduction

We have now established a comprehensive doctrine of Scripture: what it is (inspired, inerrant, authoritative, sufficient, perspicuous), how it came to us (through the canonical process and the providential preservation of the manuscript tradition), and in what languages we access it (through the history of translation and the text of faithful modern versions). All of this doctrinal and historical work serves a single practical end: the reading, understanding, and application of the Bible by the people of God. The doctrine of Scripture exists to equip the church to encounter the living God in the living Word.

But encountering the living God in the Word requires more than opening the Bible and reading. It requires reading rightly, with the methods, the skills, and the commitments that enable the reader to hear what the text is actually saying rather than what she projects onto it, what she wants it to say, or what her cultural moment has predisposed her to find. This is the domain of hermeneutics: the science and art of biblical interpretation.

Hermeneutics is not a recent academic invention, though the formal discipline is relatively modern. The practice of careful biblical interpretation is as old as Scripture itself. Ezra and the Levites were practicing hermeneutics when they read from the book of the law, "translating to give the sense so that they understood what was read" (Nehemiah 8:8). Paul was practicing hermeneutics when he instructed Timothy to "accurately handle the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15). Every faithful preacher, every careful Bible student, every pastor who has worked through the meaning of a difficult text before applying it to a congregation is engaged in the hermeneutical task.

This lesson introduces the principles of sound biblical hermeneutics. We will define the discipline and its goal, articulate the grammatical-historical method as the Reformed hermeneutical tradition, defend the priority of authorial intent against reader-response alternatives, examine and reject the higher-critical methods that undermine faithful interpretation, clarify what "literal" interpretation actually means (the sensus literalis), and introduce the critical importance of genre awareness. Lesson 20 will build on this foundation by examining the Christocentric dimension of biblical interpretation: reading all of Scripture in light of Jesus Christ, to whom the whole canonical narrative points.

I. DEFINING HERMENEUTICS: THE SCIENCE AND ART OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

Hermeneutics is the study of interpretation, specifically, the systematic reflection on the principles and methods by which we determine the meaning of texts. The word derives from the Greek hermēneuo ("to interpret"), which is related to the name of the Greek god Hermes, the divine messenger who carried communications between the gods and mortals. The etymology is suggestive: hermeneutics is about the faithful transmission of meaning from a sender to a receiver.

Biblical hermeneutics is the application of interpretive principles specifically to the biblical text. It asks: How do we read the Bible rightly? What methods best enable us to hear what God said through the human authors of Scripture? What assumptions, approaches, and skills does the faithful interpreter bring to the text? And what errors of method or presupposition lead interpreters astray?

The description of hermeneutics as both a science and an art is important. It is a science in that it is governed by principled, systematic methods that can be identified, described, and taught. The grammatical-historical method is a set of verifiable, publicly accountable procedures: examine the original language, study the historical context, identify the literary genre, trace the canonical context. These are not arbitrary personal preferences; they are methodological principles that any interpreter can employ and that any community can evaluate.

But hermeneutics is also an art because the application of these principles to particular texts requires judgment, sensitivity, and wisdom that cannot be fully reduced to rules. Knowing the principles of historical narrative interpretation does not automatically tell you how to read the book of Jonah, or how to distinguish literal from symbolic elements in the book of Revelation, or how to apply the food laws of Leviticus in a new covenant context. These require the kind of disciplined, Spirit-dependent, community-accountable interpretive judgment that develops through years of careful reading, theological formation, and humble submission to the text.

II. THE GOAL OF INTERPRETATION: AUTHORIAL INTENT

The most foundational question in hermeneutics is: What is the goal of biblical interpretation? What are we trying to find when we interpret a text? The answer of the grammatical-historical method is clear and unapologetic: the goal is to understand what the human author, under divine inspiration, intended to communicate to his original audience.

This goal of authorial intent is the linchpin of the entire hermeneutical enterprise. If the meaning of a text is located in what the author intended to communicate, then interpretation is a discipline of discovery: the interpreter seeks to recover a meaning that the text already carries, a meaning that was placed there by the author and that exists independently of the interpreter's own perspective, concerns, or cultural moment. The text has a meaning; the interpreter's task is to find it.

A. The Divine and Human Dimensions of Authorial Intent

Because Scripture has two genuine authors (God the Holy Spirit and the human writer), the question of authorial intent in biblical hermeneutics is richer than in general literary hermeneutics. The human author's intent is the primary object of exegetical inquiry: we study the grammar, the vocabulary, the historical context, and the literary structure of a text in order to determine what Isaiah or Paul or John intended to communicate to their audiences. But the human author wrote under divine inspiration, and the divine Author's intent encompasses and exceeds the human author's, as the New Testament's use of the Old Testament frequently demonstrates.

The phenomenon of sensus plenior (the "fuller sense"), in which an Old Testament text carries a meaning that the human author did not fully grasp but that the divine Author intended, is real and must be accounted for in a fully biblical hermeneutic. But it does not undermine the primacy of the human author's intent as the starting point of exegesis. We begin with what the human author intended; we then trace how the divine Author's fuller purpose unfolds in the canonical progression. The fuller sense does not contradict the literal sense; it fulfills it. (This dimension will be explored more fully in Lesson 20.)

B. Why Authorial Intent Grounds Interpretation

The priority of authorial intent is not an arbitrary methodological preference; it is grounded in the doctrine of verbal-plenary inspiration. If God communicated His truth through the specific words chosen by specific human authors in specific historical contexts, then those specific words, in their historical and literary context, are the vehicle of God's communicative intent. To read the text through the lens of the reader's own concerns rather than through the lens of the author's intent is to substitute the reader's voice for God's voice, which is the fundamental hermeneutical error.

The alternative to authorial intent is reader-response interpretation, which locates meaning in the reader's encounter with the text rather than in the author's communicative act. It makes every interpreter's reading equally valid and therefore provides no principled basis for distinguishing faithful interpretation from distortion. If the text means whatever it means to me, then I can make it say whatever I want it to say, and there is no court of appeal against my reading. This is not interpretation; it is projection. The grammatical-historical method protects the community of interpreters from the tyranny of individualistic misreading by grounding the text's meaning in the publicly accessible evidence of the author's intent.

III. THE GRAMMATICAL-HISTORICAL METHOD: THE REFORMED HERMENEUTICAL TRADITION

The grammatical-historical method is the hermeneutical approach developed in the Reformation era and refined through subsequent centuries of evangelical and Reformed biblical scholarship. It is the standard approach of expository preaching, systematic theology, and academic biblical study in the evangelical tradition, and it is the approach that this series consistently employs.

The method is defined by its two primary commitments: grammatical (attending to the specific words, grammar, syntax, and literary structure of the original text) and historical (attending to the historical, cultural, and canonical context in which the text was produced). These two commitments work together to enable the interpreter to

determine what the human author, in his specific historical moment, expressed through his specific use of language.

A. The Grammatical Dimension

The grammatical dimension of interpretation means attending to the text as a linguistic artifact: a particular arrangement of words, sentences, and literary structures that carries meaning through its specific linguistic form. This includes:

Word study: Understanding the meaning of key terms in the original language (Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek), including their range of meaning, their etymology, and their usage in the broader literature of the period.

Syntax and grammar: Attending to the grammatical relationships between words and sentences: the tense, mood, and voice of verbs; the case relationships of nouns; the force of conjunctions and prepositions; the structure of dependent clauses.

Literary structure: Identifying the literary organization of the text (its paragraphs, strophes, chiasms, inclusions, and other structural features) that indicates how the author has arranged his material to communicate his meaning.

Discourse analysis: Understanding how individual sentences and paragraphs relate to the larger argument, narrative, or poem of which they are a part. The meaning of a sentence is often determined by its place in the argument, and the argument is often determined by the discourse structure of the whole.

B. The Historical Dimension

The historical dimension of interpretation means attending to the specific historical, cultural, and canonical context in which the text was written. This includes:

Historical background: Understanding the events, institutions, geography, and cultural conventions of the world in which the biblical author wrote and his original audience lived. A passage about leprosy in Leviticus, a reference to the Roman imperial cult in Revelation, or a description of first-century synagogue practice in the Gospels all require historical knowledge to be properly understood.

Cultural context: Understanding the social, economic, religious, and literary conventions of the author's cultural world. The meaning of an action described in a biblical narrative may depend on cultural knowledge that the original audience possessed automatically but that modern readers must acquire through study.

Canonical context: Understanding where a text falls in the unfolding canonical narrative: in what period of redemptive history it was written, what covenant framework it operates within, and how it relates to earlier and later canonical revelation. A text from the Mosaic covenant must be read with awareness of its place in the covenant structure and its relationship to the later fulfillment in Christ.

IV. THE PRIORITY OF AUTHORIAL INTENT OVER READER RESPONSE

Since the mid-twentieth century, biblical interpretation has been increasingly influenced by reader-response theories drawn from literary criticism and postmodern philosophy. These theories, in various forms, argue that meaning is not located in the author's intent or even in the text itself but in the reader's encounter with the text, so that meaning is produced by the reading event rather than discovered in the text.

Reader-response approaches to the Bible range from the relatively benign (acknowledging that readers bring different questions and perspectives to the text that shape what they notice) to the radically subversive (claiming that the text has no objective meaning and that every reading is equally valid). The evangelical tradition has appropriately resisted reader-response hermeneutics, and the reason is theological: if the Bible is the Word of God, then it carries a meaning that God placed in it through the human author's communicative act, and that meaning is the objective norm that governs the reader's interpretation. The reader does not produce the meaning; she receives it.

A. The Legitimate Role of the Reader

Resisting reader-response hermeneutics does not require pretending that readers are blank slates who bring nothing to the text. Every reader comes with pre-understandings, questions, cultural frameworks, and theological commitments that shape what she notices and how she understands what she reads. This is not a failure; it is a feature of all human cognition. The goal of good hermeneutical practice is not to eliminate the reader's perspective but to discipline it, bringing it into submission to the objective meaning of the text through the methods of grammatical-historical interpretation.

The hermeneutical circle describes the genuine interaction between the reader's pre-understanding and the text's meaning: the reader approaches the text with an initial understanding, the text challenges and refines that understanding, and the reader's revised understanding enables a deeper engagement with the text. This circular dynamic is the normal process of understanding, and it does not threaten the objectivity of the text's meaning as long as the reader is genuinely open to having her pre-understanding corrected by the text rather than using the text merely to confirm what she already believed.

B. The Danger of Ideological Eisegesis

The most practically dangerous form of reader-response interpretation in contemporary evangelical contexts is ideological eisegesis: the reading of contemporary social, political, or cultural commitments into the biblical text under the guise of fresh interpretation. When a reading of a text is driven primarily by the interpreter's ideological commitments rather than by the grammatical-historical evidence of what the text actually says, the result is eisegesis: the interpreter's voice has displaced the Author's voice.

This danger operates across the theological spectrum. The politically conservative interpreter who reads American exceptionalism into the Old Testament theocracy, and the politically progressive interpreter who reads contemporary social justice frameworks into the prophetic literature, are both committing the same hermeneutical error: allowing their cultural and ideological pre-commitments to govern the text rather than submitting to the text's own grammar and historical context. The grammatical-historical method is the discipline that identifies and resists this error, by grounding the interpretive process in publicly accountable evidence about authorial intent rather than in the interpreter's personal or cultural preferences.

V. THE REJECTION OF HIGHER CRITICAL METHODS

The grammatical-historical method must be distinguished from the methods of historical-critical scholarship that developed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries under the influence of Enlightenment rationalism. These methods, collectively described as "higher criticism," approach the biblical text with the same tools and assumptions applied to any ancient human document, treating it as a product of human religious and cultural development rather than as the inspired Word of God.

A. The JEDP Theory (Documentary Hypothesis)

The Documentary Hypothesis, associated primarily with the German scholar Julius Wellhausen (1876), proposed that the Pentateuch was not written by Moses but was composed from four distinct source documents that were later woven together by editors: J (the Yahwist, who used the name YHWH for God), E (the Elohist, who used Elohim), D (the Deuteronomist), and P (the Priestly source). The theory has been enormously influential in academic Old Testament scholarship.

The evangelical rejection of the Documentary Hypothesis rests on multiple grounds. Theologically, the hypothesis assumes that the biblical authors were capable of producing an inspired, unified text only by combining multiple sources, an assumption that effectively denies the organic inspiration of the final text. Exegetically, the criteria used to distinguish the supposed sources (divine names, vocabulary, theological perspective) have been subjected to devastating critique; the features that source critics attribute to different sources can be explained more naturally by recognizing that a single author uses different terminology for different purposes and in different contexts. Historically, Jesus Himself attributes the Pentateuch to Moses (Mark 7:10; 10:5; John 5:46–47; 7:19), as do the rest of the New Testament authors; their testimony is decisive for the evangelical interpreter.

B. Form Criticism

Form criticism, developed by Hermann Gunkel for the Old Testament and Martin Dibelius and Rudolf Bultmann for the New, seeks to identify the pre-literary oral forms lying behind the written text and to determine the community settings ("Sitz im Leben") in which those forms were used. In New Testament scholarship, Bultmann's form criticism was particularly destructive: he argued that the Gospel traditions were substantially shaped by the early church's theological and kerygmatic needs rather than by historical memory of Jesus' actual words and deeds.

The evangelical critique of form criticism is both methodological and theological. Methodologically, Bultmann's form criticism relies on an unwarranted skepticism about the historical reliability of the Gospel traditions and on a criterion of dissimilarity that systematically excludes from the authentic Jesus whatever is consistent with Judaism or early Christianity. This is an arbitrary procedure that would allow the same method to "prove" that no historical figure actually said what their followers attributed to them. Theologically, form criticism's assumption that the Gospels are primarily theological constructs rather than historical witnesses directly contradicts the New Testament's own claim to eyewitness testimony (Luke 1:1–4; John 21:24; 1 John 1:1–3; 2 Peter 1:16).

C. Redaction Criticism

Redaction criticism focuses on the work of the final editors of biblical documents, analyzing how they shaped their sources to serve theological purposes. Sensitivity to the theological shaping of biblical books is a legitimate hermeneutical concern; every biblical author has a theological perspective that shapes how he presents his material. But redaction criticism in its dominant academic form tends to treat the Gospel writers as theological innovators who substantially modified the tradition they received, and to treat the theological shaping of a text as evidence of historical unreliability rather than as the natural activity of a theologically engaged historian.

The fundamental problem with higher criticism across all its forms is the same: it approaches the biblical text with the presupposition that it is a purely human document shaped by the natural forces of cultural development, religious community interests, and editorial creativity, without the divine inspiration and authority that the text claims for itself. Starting with this presupposition, higher criticism consistently undermines the historical reliability, the theological coherence, and the authoritative character of Scripture. The grammatical-historical method, by contrast, begins with the theological presupposition that the text is the inspired Word of God and proceeds to determine its meaning through the historical and linguistic study of what God said through its human authors.

VI. THE LITERAL SENSE OF SCRIPTURE: WHAT "LITERAL" REALLY MEANS

The term "literal interpretation" is widely used in evangelical discourse but widely misunderstood, both by those who advocate it and by those who criticize it. Understanding what literal interpretation actually means, and what it does not mean, is essential for the practice of the grammatical-historical method.

A. What Literal Interpretation Is NOT

Literal interpretation does not mean that every statement in Scripture must be read with wooden, flat-footed literalism, as if the Bible never uses metaphor, hyperbole, poetry, or figurative language. When Jesus says "I am the door" (John 10:9), a literal interpretation does not require the reader to imagine Him as a rectangular panel of wood with hinges. When the Psalmist says "the mountains skipped like rams" (Psalm 114:4), a literal interpretation does not require the reader to believe in ambulatory mountains. To read these as literal claims about physical reality is to read them contrary to the plain literary sense of the text, which is precisely what the sensus literalis forbids.

The criticism that "literalist" interpretation is simplistic and unable to account for the richness of biblical literature is often directed at this wooden caricature rather than at the genuine doctrine. The actual doctrine of literal interpretation is far more nuanced and far more sensitive to the full range of biblical literary expression.

B. What Literal Interpretation IS

Literal interpretation means reading each text according to its natural literary sense, given its genre, its linguistic conventions, and its communicative context. The Latin phrase sensus literalis ("the literal sense") refers to the plain meaning of the text as determined by careful attention to what the author intended to communicate through the form he used.

When John writes "in the beginning was the Word" (John 1:1), the literal sense of that statement is that the eternal Son of God existed before creation, because John is writing theological prose that makes that assertion in its natural literary sense. When Isaiah says "the mountains and hills will break forth into shouts of joy before you" (Isaiah 55:12), the literal sense of that statement, given its poetic genre, is that the created order will participate joyfully in the eschatological redemption. The imagery of nature celebrating is the poet's vivid way of expressing that reality, not a literal meteorological prediction.

The literal sense is the sense that attends to the actual communicative intention of the text in its actual literary form. This is why the Reformers insisted on the sensus literalis against the allegorical method that dominated medieval interpretation. The allegorical method allowed interpreters to find hidden spiritual meanings beneath the literal surface of the text: meanings that had no basis in the author's communicative intent and that could be manufactured to support virtually any theological conclusion. The literal sense disciplines interpretation by anchoring it to what the author actually said, in the form he actually used, to the audience he actually addressed.

VII. GENRE AWARENESS: READING EACH TEXT IN ITS OWN LITERARY FORM

The most practically important implication of the sensus literalis is genre awareness: the recognition that different kinds of literature communicate in different ways, and that the literal interpretation of any text requires reading it according to the conventions of its genre. The Bible contains a remarkable variety of literary genres, and reading any text well requires understanding what kind of text it is.

A. Historical Narrative

Historical narrative, the dominant genre of much of the Old Testament (Genesis through Esther; 1–2 Chronicles) and of the Gospels and Acts, makes factual claims about what happened in time and space. The literal sense of historical narrative is historical: these events actually occurred; these people actually lived; these words were actually spoken. Reading historical narrative literally means taking its historical claims as genuine claims about actual events. This is why inerrancy's scope extends to historical narrative: a historically erroneous narrative is a false narrative, and a false narrative is not the Word of the God who cannot lie.

Historical narrative does not, however, require naively flat reading. Every historical narrative is selective (it describes some events and not others), perspectival (it describes events from a particular theological and narrative angle), and shaped (its author has arranged the material to serve communicative purposes). The narrative genre is not simple description but theologically interpreted history. The literal sense of a historical narrative includes its theological interpretation of events, not just its bare factual content.

B. Poetry and Wisdom Literature

Biblical poetry (the Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Solomon, Lamentations, and large portions of the prophetic books) communicates through the conventions of Hebrew verse: parallelism, imagery, metaphor, personification, hyperbole, and the heightened emotional and aesthetic register of poetic language. The literal sense of poetry is not a demand for literal factuality in every image; it is the recognition that the poet is communicating truth

through the conventions of poetic language, and that those conventions must be understood in order to receive what the poet is saying.

The wisdom literature (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job) operates differently from both narrative and poetry. Proverbs are generalizations about how the world normally works, not absolute guarantees. Job is a dramatic dialogue in which the speakers express the full range of human anguish, theological confusion, and even protest, and the theology expressed by Job's friends is explicitly identified as false by God at the end of the book. Reading wisdom literature literally requires understanding its genre-specific conventions.

C. Prophecy

Biblical prophecy is among the most complex and most debated genres in terms of interpretation. Prophetic texts typically combine historical address (a word to a specific community in a specific historical moment), typological significance (patterns and figures that point beyond their immediate context), and eschatological promise (a vision of the ultimate fulfillment of God's redemptive purposes). Reading prophecy literally requires sensitivity to all three dimensions and to the poetic and visionary literary forms in which prophecy frequently appears.

The misidentification of prophetic poetry as flat prose prediction is one of the most common hermeneutical errors in popular biblical interpretation. The literal sense of "they will beat their swords into plowshares" (Isaiah 2:4) is the prophetic poet's vivid image for the eschatological peace of the messianic age, not a literal metallurgical prediction. The literal sense of "the mountains shall drip sweet wine" (Amos 9:13) is the prophet's hyperbolic image for the eschatological abundance of the new covenant age. Reading these texts according to their genre's conventions is not spiritualizing them; it is the literal interpretation of the poetic and visionary form in which they are actually written.

D. Epistle

The New Testament epistles (the letters of Paul, Peter, John, James, Jude, and Hebrews) are occasional documents: letters written to specific communities facing specific situations, addressing specific theological questions and pastoral challenges. The literal sense of an epistle includes its occasional character: understanding what the author intended to communicate to that specific community in that specific situation is essential for understanding what he says and how it applies to other situations.

Paul's instructions about women in 1 Corinthians 11 and 14, the food laws discussed in Romans 14–15, and the slavery instructions in Ephesians 6 and Philemon must all be read with awareness of their occasional character, their cultural context, and their place within the broader canonical argument about the nature of the new covenant community. This does not mean that their application is restricted to the first century; the Spirit who inspired them intended them for the church in every age. But their application must be mediated through careful attention to the distinction between the culturally particular form of the instruction and the trans-culturally binding principle it embodies.

E. Apocalyptic

Apocalyptic literature (Daniel, portions of Ezekiel and Zechariah, and Revelation) is a highly distinctive genre characterized by visionary experience, symbolic imagery, cosmic dualism, and the revelation of heavenly realities and eschatological events through angelic mediation. The literal sense of apocalyptic is not a demand for every

image to refer to literal physical realities; it is the recognition that the apocalyptic author communicates through the conventions of the apocalyptic genre, in which symbolic visions and numbers carry coded theological meanings that the original audience was equipped to decode.

The seven heads and ten horns of Revelation 13, the four beasts of Daniel 7, and the measuring of the temple in Revelation 11 are symbols, communicating theological and historical realities through the coded imagery of the apocalyptic tradition. Reading them literally means reading them as the apocalyptic symbols they are, not demanding that they refer to literal physical entities (though they may, in some cases, point to literal historical realities through symbolic representation). The student of apocalyptic literature must be steeped in the Old Testament prophetic tradition from which its imagery is drawn.

Key Texts (NASB 1995)

> *"Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth."*
>
> **2 Timothy 2:15**

> *"They read from the book, from the law of God, translating to give the sense so that they understood what was read."*
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> **Nehemiah 8:8**

Theological Terms and Definitions

Hermeneutics	From the Greek hermēneuo, "to interpret." The science and art of biblical interpretation; the systematic study of the principles and methods by which we determine the meaning of the biblical text. Hermeneutics is both a science (governed by principled, reproducible methods) and an art (requiring judgment, sensitivity, and skill that cannot be fully reduced to rules).
The Grammatical-Historical Method	The Reformed hermeneutical tradition that seeks to determine the meaning of a biblical text by studying its grammatical structure (the meaning of its words, phrases, and sentences in their original language) and its historical context (the situation, culture, and redemptive-historical moment in which it was written). The grammatical-historical method is grounded in the conviction that the Spirit communicated through the historical particularities of human language and culture, not apart from them.
Authorial Intent	The intended meaning of the human author, under divine inspiration, as expressed in the text he produced. The grammatical-historical method holds that the primary goal of biblical interpretation is to determine authorial intent: what did this author, writing in this historical context, in this literary form, intend to communicate to his original audience? Authorial intent is the objective meaning the text carries, as distinguished from the reader's subjective response to it.
The Sensus Literalis	Latin for "the literal sense." The plain meaning of a biblical text, determined by the grammatical-historical method: what the text says in its natural literary sense, given its genre, context, and the conventions of its language. The sensus literalis does not mean that every text must be read with wooden literalism; it means that every text must be read according to the literary sense its genre and context establish, whether that is historical narrative, poetry, prophecy, apocalyptic, or some other form.
Exegesis vs. Eisegesis	Exegesis (from the Greek ex, "out of") is the process of drawing the meaning out of the text, reading what the text says. Eisegesis (from the Greek eis, "into") is the process of reading one's own ideas into the text, making the text say what one already believes or wants to hear. The grammatical-historical method aims at exegesis; every hermeneutical failure tends toward eisegesis.
Higher Criticism	A collective term for a family of academic methods applied to the biblical text that treat it primarily as a human historical document subject to the same analytical tools as any other ancient literature. Higher criticism includes source criticism (JEDP theory), form criticism, redaction criticism, and historical criticism. These methods are distinguished from "lower criticism" (textual criticism), which is concerned with recovering the original text. Higher criticism tends to undermine confidence in the historical reliability and divine inspiration of the biblical text.
The JEDP Theory	Also called the Documentary Hypothesis. The proposal, associated primarily with Julius Wellhausen (1876), that the Pentateuch was not written by Moses but was composed by four distinct source documents (J, the Yahwist; E, the Elohist; D, the Deuteronomist; and P, the Priestly source) woven together by later editors. The theory has been widely adopted in critical scholarship but has been subjected to sustained and damaging critique; it is rejected by evangelical scholarship on both exegetical and theological grounds.
Form Criticism	A method of biblical criticism that attempts to identify the oral forms and community traditions lying behind the written text, and to determine the "Sitz im Leben" (life setting) in which those forms were used. In New Testament scholarship, form criticism has been used to argue that the Gospel traditions were substantially shaped by the early church's kerygmatic

	and liturgical needs rather than by historical memory. Evangelical scholarship rejects the methodological skepticism that characterizes much form-critical work.
Redaction Criticism	A method of biblical criticism that focuses on the work of the final editor (redactor) of a biblical document, analyzing how the editor selected, arranged, and modified his sources to serve his theological purposes. While sensitivity to an author's editorial shaping is a legitimate hermeneutical concern, redaction criticism often assumes a skeptical view of the historical reliability of the text and treats the Gospel writers as theological innovators rather than faithful historical witnesses.
Genre	The literary category to which a text belongs, defined by its characteristic form, content, and communicative conventions. The primary biblical genres include narrative, law, poetry, wisdom literature, prophecy, epistle, and apocalyptic. Genre awareness is essential for the literal interpretation of Scripture because the literal sense of a text is determined partly by its genre: what counts as a literal reading of a historical narrative differs from what counts as a literal reading of a Psalm or an apocalyptic vision.

Practical Application

A. *For the Mind: What Must We Believe?*

We must believe that the interpretation of Scripture is a disciplined activity governed by principled methods, not merely a matter of personal spiritual intuition or communal consensus. The grammatical-historical method is the right method for biblical interpretation because it is grounded in the nature of the text itself: Scripture is a verbal communication through human language in historical contexts, and the discipline that attends to those verbal and historical features is the discipline most suited to hearing what the Spirit said through the human authors.

We must also believe that there is a right meaning to every text, the meaning the author intended, and that our interpretive task is to discover it rather than to produce it. This conviction is what makes biblical interpretation possible as a public, accountable discipline rather than a merely private spiritual exercise. If every reading is equally valid, then the preacher has no basis for saying that his interpretation is more faithful than the congregation member's, and the biblical scholar has no basis for correcting the theological amateur. The objectivity of authorial intent is the foundation of the interpretive community's accountability to the text.

B. *For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?*

Paul's instruction to Timothy to be a workman who "accurately handles the word of truth" should produce in us a sober reverence for the interpretive task. Handling the Word of God, the self-expression of the living God breathed out for the salvation and formation of His people, is not a casual activity. It demands everything the interpreter has: intellectual diligence, linguistic skill, historical knowledge, theological formation, spiritual discernment, and the humble submission of the reader's own preferences to the objective authority of the text.

Let the hermeneutical task also produce in you a delight in the full range of Scripture's literary beauty. The grammatical-historical method, rightly understood, is not a reductive procedure that strips the text of its literary richness; it is the discipline that enables you to receive that richness in its fullness. The poetry of the Psalms, the narrative drama of the historical books, the soaring theological arguments of Paul, and the visionary grandeur of Revelation are fully accessible in their full literary power only to the interpreter who reads them according to the conventions of their genre.

C. *For the Hands: What Must We Do?*

1. Study the original languages. The grammatical dimension of the grammatical-historical method begins with the original text in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. If you are in pastoral ministry, invest in competency in the biblical languages. If you are a layperson, invest in tools that give you access to the original text: an interlinear Bible, a good lexicon, a concordance that references the original languages. The difference between a translation's rendering and what the original language actually says is often theologically significant.

2. Study the historical and cultural background. The historical dimension of the grammatical-historical method requires knowledge of the world in which the biblical texts were produced. Invest in good introductory works on Old Testament and New Testament backgrounds, biblical archaeology, and the history of the ancient Near East and the Greco-Roman world. This is not academic trivia; it is the essential context for understanding what the biblical authors were saying to their original audiences.

3. Develop genre sensitivity. Before you interpret any biblical text, ask: What kind of text is this? Is it historical narrative, poetry, prophecy, wisdom literature, epistle, or apocalyptic? What are the conventions of this genre, and how do those conventions shape how I should read this text? The difference between a correct and an incorrect interpretation of a biblical text is often the difference between a genre-sensitive and a genre-ignorant reading.

4. Distinguish exegesis from eisegesis. When you study a biblical text, ask yourself honestly: Am I reading out what is there, or am I reading in what I already believe? Am I letting the text shape my conclusions, or am I selecting and arranging the text's material to support a conclusion I reached before opening the Bible? This honest self-examination is the most important hermeneutical discipline, and it requires not merely good method but genuine spiritual humility.

5. Submit your interpretation to community accountability. The grammatical-historical method is a public, accountable procedure. Bring your interpretations of difficult texts to the community of the church: to your pastors, your small group, the commentary tradition, the confessional heritage. Private interpretation, unchecked by the community's engagement with the text, is the breeding ground of both theological error and spiritual pride.

D. *For Every Season of Life*

For the new student of Scripture learning to read the Bible carefully: The principles of the grammatical-historical method are not obstacles to simple, devotional engagement with Scripture; they are the tools that deepen that engagement. You do not need a seminary degree to practice basic genre awareness, to notice what kind of text you are reading, or to ask what the author was trying to communicate to his original audience. These are habits of attention that anyone can develop, and they make every reading of Scripture richer and more faithful.

For the preacher developing an expository sermon: The sermon is the public product of the hermeneutical process. Everything that happens in the study (the grammatical analysis, the historical research, the genre identification, the exegetical wrestling) serves the moment when the congregation encounters the text in the context of worship. Let your hermeneutical work be thorough enough that your sermon says what the text says rather than what you wanted to say. The congregation is not gathered to hear your insights; they are gathered to hear the Word, and the hermeneutical discipline is the way you ensure that what they hear is the Word and not your voice dressed in biblical clothing.

For the believer facing a text that seems to contradict her prior theological convictions: The hardest hermeneutical discipline is to let the text say something that challenges what you believe. This is the moment when the discipline of grammatical-historical interpretation is most important and most costly: when the historical evidence of authorial intent points in a direction your prior theological formation did not anticipate. In those moments, the faithful interpreter submits to the text. She does not dismiss the grammatical evidence as unimportant or find a reading that confirms her pre-existing convictions. She follows the text where it leads, trusting the God who breathed it out to have led it aright.

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

1. Think of a time when you heard a biblical text interpreted in a way that seemed to you to be reading something into the text rather than out of it. What made the interpretation seem wrong? What hermeneutical principles from this lesson would help you articulate why it was wrong?

Observation Questions (What Do the Texts Say?)

2. Read 2 Timothy 2:14–18. What context surrounds Paul's instruction to "accurately handle the word of truth"? What specific contrast does Paul draw in verses 17–18 between accurate handling of the Word and its mishandling? What is at stake in the interpretive task?
3. Read Nehemiah 8:1–12. Identify every specific activity Ezra and the Levites performed in relation to the text (reading, translating, explaining, etc.). How does this scene model the full hermeneutical task, and what is its stated goal?
4. Read John 5:39–47. What does Jesus say about the relationship between the Old Testament Scriptures and Himself? What hermeneutical failure does He identify in the Pharisees, and how does it relate to authorial intent?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

5. Explain the distinction between exegesis and eisegesis. Give a concrete example of each: one case where an interpreter is reading out of the text and one where she is reading into it. What are the practical consequences of the difference?
6. The lesson argues that the grammatical-historical method is grounded in the doctrine of verbal-plenary inspiration. What is the connection? If inspiration is verbal, extending to the specific words of the original text, what does that imply about the method by which we should interpret those words?
7. What is the sensus literalis, and what does it mean to read a text "literally" in this sense? How does this differ from wooden literalism? Use an example from poetry or prophecy to illustrate the difference.
8. The lesson identifies genre awareness as the most practically important implication of the sensus literalis. Choose two biblical genres from Section VII and explain how the rules of literal interpretation differ between them. What errors arise from reading one genre with the conventions of another?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

9. The lesson warns against ideological eisegesis: reading contemporary social, political, or cultural commitments into the biblical text. Identify a current cultural or theological trend that you see creating pressure toward ideological eisegesis in your church community. How would the grammatical-historical method provide correction?
10. The lesson argues that the rejection of higher-critical methods (JEDP, form criticism, redaction criticism) is grounded both methodologically and theologically. Which of these methods do you think poses the greatest practical threat to biblical confidence in the churches you are familiar with? Why, and what would a pastoral response look like?
11. Read Galatians 3:6–14. This is one of Paul's most complex hermeneutical arguments from the Old Testament. Identify the specific text he quotes, the original context of that text in Genesis, and how Paul

interprets it. Is Paul's interpretation consistent with the grammatical-historical method? What does his use of the Old Testament here model for Christian interpretation?

12. The lesson describes hermeneutics as both a science and an art. What is the "science" of interpretation, the rule-governed, teachable, publicly accountable dimension? What is the "art," the dimension that requires judgment and wisdom beyond rules? What are the implications of this description for how we should approach the interpretation of difficult texts?

Prayer Focus

Spend time in prayer as a group, asking God to make you workmen who handle His Word accurately, who read it with diligence, with method, with genre sensitivity, and with the humble submission to the text's own meaning that the Author who breathed it out deserves. Thank Him for the richness of biblical literature in all its genres: for the historical narratives that ground the faith in real events, for the poetry that gives voice to the full range of human experience before God, for the prophecy that announces His purposes across redemptive history, and for the epistles that apply the gospel to the concrete situations of His people. Ask the Spirit who inspired the Word to illumine it as you study it, to guard you against eisegesis and ideological distortion, and to give you the joy of the interpreter who finds in the careful grammatical-historical study of Scripture the living voice of the God who breathed it out.

Soli Deo Gloria

To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

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