

## PRINCIPLES OF INTERPRETATION (PART I)

Rules are required for hermeneutics just as they are required for any other discipline like math, science, or the study of languages. Rules are principles. The purpose of this study is to help you approach God's Word with a set of principles, that will enable you to arrive at the true meaning of the Scriptures. It is only as you master the principles that you will excel at "rightly dividing the Word of Truth" (II Timothy 2:15). First we will look at GENERAL PRINCIPLES for interpreting the Bible.

1. **Consider the context.** Context literally means what is with the text. To interpret a Bible passage it is important to study the material surrounding the text. There are three levels of context:
  - a. **Immediate context.** This refers to the words, sentences, or paragraphs which immediately precede or follow the text. For instance, Philippians 4:12 says, "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling." This could lead one to believe that salvation is obtained through works rather than faith. That would oppose all the New Testament teaching on salvation. Yet, the next verse immediately clears up the confusion. Verse 13 goes on to say, "For it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure." When you view the two verses together you see that God works salvation in us, and we are to work it out. When studying individual Psalms or Proverbs, you discover the meaning of the first part of a verse by reading the second part of the verse. Hebrew poetry is based on the repetition of ideas rather than rhyme and rhythm. By looking at the second part of a couplet one can easily see that the verse interprets itself. Proverbs 15:23 says, "A man has joy by the answer of his mouth, and a word spoken in due season, how good it is." It is obvious that both of these sentences say the same thing in different words. There are not two separate meanings. Sometimes we memorize verses without realizing that they are a part of a larger context, so it is important that we don't automatically assume a meaning that may not be true. An example is Revelation 3:20 – "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If any man hears my voice and opens the door I will come in..." Most of the time this verse is used to describe Jesus as trying to enter a person's heart who needs to be saved. The context reveals that Jesus is knocking at the door of the church of Laodicea, not the heart of an individual. The church needed to repent. In all their religion they had left Jesus on the outside, and they didn't even know it. Another danger is using a concordance to look up a word without studying the word (or verse) in its context. Many heresies have been perpetrated through the careless use of a concordance. It is easy to look up a verse by itself, link it to a subject, and then make an application which may be completely wrong. Attention to context helps avoid this error. It is easy to assume that a word means the same thing in every instance, so we must always check the context. For instance the word "flesh" can be used in nine different ways in the Bible: (1) The whole animal creation, (2) the living body, (3) meat, (4) the body as distinguished from the spirit, (5) human nature, (6) natural or physical origin, (7) the sensuous (animal) nature of man, (8) the sinful nature of man, (9) a general term for the secret parts. The only way to know for sure what a word means is to study it in its context.