

UNDERSTAND THE WORDS

A text should always be interpreted according to the meaning of the words. In the Bible God used language to communicate with man. A word is a unit of language which has meaning. Since most words have more than one meaning, a word by itself is seldom clear. The word "trunk" can refer to the long nose of an elephant, a box to put clothes in, the luggage space in a car, or a part of a tree. Other words used with a particular word are usually necessary to give the correct meaning.

1. Over time words change their meaning. A word does not usually mean what it originally meant. The King James Version of the English Bible was translated in 1611. It has been more than 600 years since that Bible was first published. Since that time many of the words have undergone significant changes. In I Thessalonians 4:15 of the KJV it says, "We which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep." Today that word means almost the opposite of what it meant 400 years ago. The New King James says, "We which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not precede them which are asleep." If we are to interpret the Bible correctly, we must obtain a proper understand of the words used. Therefore if the translation you are using is very old, you must consider whether the meaning of a word has changed over time.

2. Different words may have the same or similar meaning. Many times we use different words that mean the same thing for variety. These are called synonyms. The Bible does this too. We must not think that every time the Bible uses a different word for another word that the meanings are different. For instance, Matthew 20:21 uses the word kingdom in the same way as Mark 10:37 uses the word glory. Even though different words are used, they mean the same thing. The different words for prayer in I Timothy 2:1 are synonyms. They express different aspects of the same idea.

3. Sometimes a word is used differently in the Bible than it is used in common speech. If the average person spoke of a just man, he would be referring to one who is fair with people. He does not take advantage of people. The Bible, however, uses the word "just" to refer to a person who has been declared righteous by God. This means that a believer in Jesus has a right standing before God.

4. The same word may have more than one meaning. In Ezekiel 44:5-6 the word "house" refers to the temple (or sanctuary), but it goes on to refer to Israel as the people of God. The context usually helps to understand the differences, but there are ways to study words, which we will now consider.