

STUDY THE BACKGROUND

It is important to remember that there is a social and historical context for both the Old and New Testaments and for every book of the Bible. There are also geographical elements that should be considered. Just as we must consider the language of a people we must consider where they lived, when they lived, and the way they lived. It is easy to misinterpret passages if we do not keep those backgrounds in mind. We tend to read our own culture into Scripture, but this can be a big mistake, and it can lead to many errors of interpretation. Each culture has its own idioms (language expressions unique to that culture) which have no meaning when they are removed from their cultural context. We should seek to understand Biblical expressions when possible. The first and primary meaning of any passage of Scripture is what it meant in its cultural and historical setting. Once we know what it meant to people living then and there, we may be able to interpret it for people living in the here and now. When Jesus stated that people who desire to follow Him should "Take up his cross daily," the people who heard him understood that when one carried a cross, he was a convicted criminal and on his way to death. Jesus was not merely talking about hardships and difficulties. He was referring to following in the steps of Jesus to death, if need be. We would not know that if it were not for an understanding of the background at the time in Judea under the rule of the Romans. The background then includes three elements: (1) Historical elements, (2) cultural elements, (3) geographical elements. Good commentaries and books on Bible customs are helpful can help you to discover this information.

UNDERSTANDING THE BACKGROUND

- a. Familiarize yourself with the whole Bible. There is no substitute for reading the Bible if you want to know it. Read the Bible as frequently as you can for familiarity. Know the different types of books in the Old Testament such as law, history, wisdom, and prophets (major and minor). In the New Testament distinguish between the gospels, history (Acts), epistles, and prophecy (Revelation). Know the type of literature you are reading, so you will learn how to understand the difference in the way the Bible presents information. Mark your Bible with notes and cross references so you can track your questions and insights each time you read the Bible through.
- b. Purchase a good study Bible. A study Bible is like a brief one-volume commentary. If you not have a study Bible, use a Bible with notes and references in the margins and maps to help find geographical locations.
- c. Use reference books. It is good to begin a library with basic study books including: Bible dictionary, commentaries, concordance, and word study books.

INTERPRETING A PASSAGE

- a. Apply what you have learned about the background to any parts of a passage that are confusing or obscure. Deal with the problems in the text before you go any further. Use your commentaries and references to help you through the difficult passages.
- b. Determine what the passage meant to the people it was originally written to. Use the historical and cultural backgrounds to do this.
- c. Determine what meaning is relevant for people in our culture today before making any applications. For instance, in the Old Testament when a person offered a burnt offering, it was a symbol of total dedication (specifically the total dedication of Jesus Christ). The whole animal was burned up. None of it was eaten. Even though we do not offer animal sacrifices today, the idea of total dedication to God is appropriate. Anointing by oil is another example. Anointing was done to acknowledge an official

position such as king, high priest, or prophet. Today we would not be required to do the same thing, but the idea of the anointing of the Holy Spirit is still carried over to our times. The Apostle John tells us that the anointing is the Holy Spirit with in us (1 John 2:27). When we are filled with the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 5:18), the anointing of the Holy Spirit is released in ministry.