

How to Interpret the Bible

By Matt Slick

The Bible is God's Word. But some of the interpretations derived from it are not. There are many cults and Christian groups that use the Bible, claiming their interpretations are correct. Too often, however, the interpretations not only differ dramatically but are clearly contradictory. This does not mean that the Bible is a confusing document. Rather, the problem lies in those who interpret and the methods they use.

We need, as best as can be had, the guidance of the Holy Spirit in interpreting God's Word. Because we are sinners, we are incapable of interpreting God's word perfectly all of the time. The body, mind, will, and emotions are affected by sin and make 100% interpretive accuracy impossible. This does not mean that accurate understanding of God's Word is impossible. But it does mean that we need to approach His word with care, humility, and reason. Additionally, we need, as best as can be had, the guidance of the Holy Spirit in interpreting God's Word. After all, the Bible is inspired by God and is addressed to His people. The Holy Spirit helps us to understand what God's word means and how to apply it.

On the human level, to lessen the errors that come in our interpretations, we need to look at some basic biblical interpretive methods. I'll list some of the principles in the form of questions and then apply them one at a time to a passage of Scripture.

I offer the following principles as guidelines for examining a passage. They are not exhaustive, nor are they set in concrete.

1. Who wrote/spoke the passage and to whom was it addressed?
2. What does the passage say?
3. Are there any words or phrases in the passage that need to be examined?
4. What is the immediate context?
5. What is the broader context in the chapter and book?
6. What are the related verses to the passage's subject and how do they affect the understanding of this passage?
7. What is the historical and cultural background?
8. What do I conclude about the passage?
9. Do my conclusions agree or disagree with related areas of Scripture and others who have studied the passage?
10. What have I learned and what must I apply to my life?

In order to teach you how these questions can affect your interpretation of a passage, I have chosen one which, when examined closely, may lead you into a very different interpretation than what is commonly held. I leave it to you to determine if my interpretation is accurate.

The passage that I am going to use is [Matt. 24:40](#), "Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left," (NIV).

1. Who wrote/spoke the passage and who was it addressed to?

Jesus spoke the words and they were recorded by Matthew. Jesus spoke them to His disciples in response to a question, which we will get to later.

2. What does the passage say?

The passage simply says that one out of two men in a field will be taken. It doesn't say

where, why, when, or how. It just says one will be taken. It doesn't define the field as belonging to someone or in a particular place.

3. Are there any words in the passage that need to be examined?

No particular word in this verse really stands out as needing to be examined, but to follow this exercise, I will use the word "taken." By using a Strong Concordance and a dictionary of New Testament words (Vine's, for example), I can check the Greek word and learn about it. The word in Greek is *paralambano*. It means "1) to take to, to take with one's self, to join to one's self, 2) to receive something transmitted."

A point worth mentioning about word studies is that a word means what it means in context. However, by examining how a word is used in multiple contexts, the meaning of the word can take on a new dimension. For example, the word for "love" in Greek is "agapao." It is generally believed to mean "divine love." This seems obvious, since it is used in [John 3:16](#) in that way. However, the same word is used in [Luke 11:43](#). Jesus says, "Woe to you Pharisees, because you love the most important seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces," (NIV). The word used there is "agapao." It would seem then that the meaning of the word might mean something more along the lines of "total commitment to."

However, we must be careful not to insert a meaning of a word from one context into that of another. For example: 1) That new cadet is green. 2) That tree is green. The first green means "new and inexperienced." The second one means the color green. Would we want to impose the contextual meaning of one into the other? It wouldn't be a good idea.

4. What is the immediate context?

This is where this particular verse will come alive. The immediate context is as follows, [Matt. 24:37-42](#), "As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; ³⁹and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. ⁴⁰Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. ⁴¹Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left. ⁴²Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come," (NIV).

Immediately we can see that the person taken in verse 40 is paralleled by people being taken in verse 39. That is, the "being taken" are of the same kind.

A further question needs to be asked. Who was taken in verse 39? Was it Noah and his family or was it the people who were eating and drinking? The answer to that question might help us understand the original passage better. Therefore, the next interpretive step will help us greatly.

5. What is the broader context in the chapter and book?

A passage should always be looked at in context, not only in its immediate context of the verses directly before and after it, but also in the context of the chapter it is in and the book in which it is written.

Jesus' discourse from which our verse was taken began with a question. Jesus had just left the temple and in verse 2 told His disciples that "... not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down." Then in verse 3 the disciples asked Jesus, "Tell us," they said, "when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?"

(NIV). Jesus then goes on to prophesy about things to come at the end of the age. He speaks of false Christs, of tribulation, of the sun being darkened, of His return, and of two men in a field where one will be taken and the other left.

The context, then, is eschatological. That means that it deals with the last things, or the time shortly before Jesus' return. Many people think that this verse in [Matt. 24:40](#) refers to the rapture spoken of in [1 Thess. 4:16-17](#). It may. But it is interesting to note that the context of the verse seems to suggest that the wicked are taken, not the good.

Now, about this time you might be thinking that this method of interpreting passages isn't that good. After all, the "one taken, one left" verse is obviously about the rapture. Right? Well, maybe. You see, we all come to the Bible with preconceived ideas. Sometimes they are right, sometimes wrong. We should always be ready to have our understanding of the Bible challenged by what it says. If we are not willing, then we are prideful. And God is distant from the proud ([Psalm 138:6](#)).

6. What are the related verses to the passage's subject and how do they affect the understanding of this passage?

It just so happens that there are related verses, in fact, a parallel passage found in [Luke 17:26-27](#). "Just as it was in the days of Noah, so also will it be in the days of the Son of Man. ²⁷People were eating, drinking, marrying and being given in marriage up to the day Noah entered the ark. Then the flood came and destroyed them all," (NIV).

Immediately we discover that related verses do indeed affect how we understand our initial verse. It is clear from this passage in Luke that the ones taken by the flood are those who were eating and drinking and being given in marriage. In other words, it wasn't the godly people who were taken, it was the wicked.

As you can see, this has a profound impact on how we understand our passage in [Matt. 24:40](#). Does the context suggest that the one in the field who is taken is the one who is wicked? Also, how does this context affect my preconceived ideas about this verse? Let's read the verse again in context. [Matt. 24:37-42](#), "As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; ³⁹and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. ⁴⁰Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. ⁴¹Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left. ⁴²"Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come," (NIV).

What do you think now? Is the one taken the good or the bad? Also, does this verse refer to the rapture or not?

Just asking.

Of related interest is a passage in [Matt. 13:24-30](#) where Jesus gives the parable of the sower who sows good seed in his field and someone sows tares. The servants asked if they should go immediately and gather up the wheat. But, in verse 30, Jesus says, "Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn."

The point worth noting here is that the first ones gathered are the weeds, not the wheat. This is most interesting since Jesus explains the parable in [Matt. 13:36-43](#) and states that they will be cast into the furnace.

Additionally, when we turn to Luke 17, which is the parallel passage of Matt. 24, we

discover that the disciples ask Jesus a question in response to Jesus' statement that "two will be in the field and one will be taken." In verse 37 they ask, "Where, Lord?" He [Jesus] replied, "Where there is a dead body, there the vultures will gather."

They are taken to a place of death.

7. What is the historical and cultural background?

This is a more difficult question to answer. It requires a bit more research. A commentary is worth examining here, since they usually provide the historic and cultural backgrounds that help to unravel the text.

In this context, Israel was under Roman rule. They had been denied the right of capital punishment, of self-rule, and the ability to wage war. Rome had dominated the small nation. Judaism was tolerated among the Roman leadership. After all, Israel was a small far-away country with a people that were fanatical about their religion. So, Rome allowed Israel to be ruled by Jewish political puppets.

The Temple was the place of worship for the Israelite community. It was there that the blood sacrifices were made by the high priest for the atonement of the nation. It had taken 46 years to build ([John 2:20](#)). Jesus said the temple would be destroyed, which prompted the question which lead to His discourse which contains the passage we are examining.

Culturally, the Jewish people were dedicated to the Old Testament. Within those pages were prophecies of the Messiah, of the end of the age, and of the delivery from bondage. The Jewish people knew that, and were in a state of expectation. Along comes Jesus with miracles and words of great power. Naturally, they would look to him as a possible deliverer.

8. What do I conclude about the passage?

Since the context of the passage suggests that it is the wicked that are taken, I am going to conclude that the one taken in the field is not the good, but the bad. I also am tempted to conclude that the wicked are taken to a place of judgment.

9. Do my conclusions agree or disagree with related areas of scripture and others who have studied the passage?

I've already presented other verses which seem to agree with my conclusion. However, it is not in agreement with all of the commentaries I've read on this verse. At this point I would need to present my conclusion to others to see what they think. Just because I studied the Word and arrived at a conclusion does not mean that it is correct. But it doesn't mean it is wrong either.

By consulting with others, by examining the word again, and by seeking God and his illumination, I can only hope to arrive at the best possible conclusion about a passage.

10. What have I learned and what must I apply to my life?

Interpretation of scripture is for a purpose: To understand God's word more accurately. With a better understanding of His word, we can then more accurately apply it to the area that it addresses. In this case, the passage deals with an area of the future, and area of judgment. It is information that Jesus has revealed and that He wants us to know about. The application then would be that God will execute judgment upon the unrighteous at the end of the age.

Concluding remarks

This article is only an illustration. It is basic and does not cover all the points of biblical

interpretation. But it does give a direction and an example for you to apply. As I said before, pray. Read His word. Look into the scriptures as best you can with as much understanding and skill as is possible. Be humble in your approach and test everything by the Bible.

One last thing: did you agree with my conclusion?

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