What is Biblical Interpretation?

Biblical interpretation is an important course of study, because the shift has come in Bible study. Whereas 30 years ago, the big issue was: “What do we mean by the verbal plenary inspiration?” Inspiration and inerrancy were all of the real dividing marks. Today the real dividing mark in Christianity has become: “What do you mean?” “What does the Bible mean?” And “Can I get a meaning out of the text which is my personal meaning?” Or, “Must I stay with what the Holy Spirit said through the authors?” And, of course, if we want to have a sufficient and authoritative interpretation, it means we need to go back to study the biblical text.

Now why is it that we would need a study in hermeneutics? After all, people pick up the newspaper and they begin reading, and you adjust as you go from the editorial page to the funnies. There is a different hermeneutic between the funnies (which are not funny anymore) and the editorial page. But we know that instinctively because we are part of that culture.

The problem with the Bible is: God has given it to us in 1,500 years, from Moses—1400 BC—all the way through John—AD 90–95—and through 40 different writers, approximately (some we don’t know). The writer of Hebrews, for example, Origen said, “Only God knew”—that was correct. Although that didn’t stop scholars. They have all posited various people: Priscilla and Aquila and Barnabas and Luke as volume number 3—Luke and Acts and Hebrews as the third one. But there will be seminars in heaven, I’m quite sure. There’s not a verse; it’s just a hunch that I have that there will be seminars. I just assume there is more than music lessons. I don’t want to harp on that point, but I think it is something we should think about.

But given that span of a millennium and a half, then, God gave that to people in their times in their languages—there are three languages in the Bible. There is Hebrew, there is Aramaic, and there is Greek. And we are speaking mainly and teaching and
reading the Bible in English. So again, that’s another reason why we need help. But nevertheless, hermeneutics is a great and important study. The basic verse I call to your attention would be the one at the end of Luke 24 where Jesus meets the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. They’re going down the road terribly discouraged. Cleopas, we know his name—he probably still had his name tag on—but the other guy got away. So we don’t know what his name is, but we will find out in heaven.

But at any rate, Cleopas and his buddy are going down the road, and they are terribly discouraged on Easter Sunday afternoon. And they’re headed to Emmaus—we still don’t know which city that is. There are 10 or 11. They were going along and Jesus joins them and they don’t even recognize Him. As a matter of fact, I don’t think they are looking up from “kicking stones.” It doesn’t say that in the text. That’s marginal reading, “They were kicking stones.” But nevertheless, my margins are filled with perspired things. The text is inspired. The margins are perspired. You can tell the difference—no sweat!

So finally our Lord says to them, “‘Oh fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken: Did not Christ have to suffer these things and enter into His glory?’ And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, He explained ” [Luke 24:25-27 KJV]. Now the word there for “explain” in Greek here is (diermeneusen), our word “to interpret” or “to explain.” It begins with a prefix “d-i,” but then if you put a rough breathing mark over the “e” (as in Greek; I’ve written over the top of it there), it’s our word hermeneuo, which gives us hermeneutics. Also we have the Greek god Hermes. Most of us got that in fifth grade somewhere. Hermes was the god of arts and science and interpretation basically. This word here, He explained. Our Lord interpreted to them what is in all of the Scriptures concerning Himself.

I wish I could tell you we have a special here today for your coming to the seminar—and that is: “We did find on Cleopas—he was wearing a recorder—and we do have a tape, which we’ve made available to everyone of you, of all those passages in the Old Testament beginning with Moses and the prophets, where Jesus said, ‘Don’t you see? It’s talking about Me!’” Would that be a wonderful gift! That would cut down a lot, must be about 40 books right away on Where is the Messiah in the Old Testament? But our Lord thought these fellows could, they should, and they ought to have known. And He did not give them a passing grade. “Oh fools, and slow of heart” [Luke 24:25] is not top drawer. I would think that’s failing. You can judge for yourselves. But at
any rate, “He explained to them all things concerning Himself.”

So the whole system of interpretation is critical. But at this moment in history, it also happens to be right where the main forces of postmodernity and the biblical statement of the inerrancy of Scripture are meeting head-on. How did that happen?

Well in 1946, just to give you a little bit of a background here, two men, W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, wrote an essay. They were talking about art, particularly, but it passed over into all of interpretation. “How do you interpret a piece of art?” And they talked about the intentional fallacy. That was the big word. That’s a big word in the literature today. What was the intentional fallacy? They thought that the intentional fallacy was simply that we had the reader who was taking a text, and then here was the author. Normally, up to this point, we had said that “a text meant what the author wanted that text to mean,” which is what we assume when we talk in communication. It is the person who is communicating who has the right to say that’s what they meant by their use of the words. But now in what is now called postmodernity—postmodernity because the modern era stressed objectivity—we really can know objectively. And it was giving Christianity the business [trouble], because modern man could know for certain a whole lot of things. But postmodernity came along and said, “No. It was the Enlightenment that really gave us the mischief.” And the Enlightenment really praised man and his objectivity and what he could know. But now, rather than going back to any kind of absolute or objective truth, they said, “There is no objective truth.” There are truths. And truth is in the eye of the beholder. It is in the eye of the reader. So the reader brings a meaning to the text. Never mind what the author had [in mind], because this is like a painting. Once the author has painted the painting, he needs to get out of the way. It’s what everyone else gets out of it [the painting].

“Well it’s the same with the Bible then,” they said. “The Bible was given by the divine and human authors, but it’s really the reader!” And the big phrase is, “the Bible means what I say it means.” And there—in you have the biggest revolution that comes in the twentieth century. This which begins in 1946 with two men, Wimsatt and Beardsley, and that revolution has continued to the present day. It’s not only, “The Bible means what I say it means,” [also that] “truth means what I say it means,” “ethical means what I say it means,” “the beautiful means what I say it means.” “I define everything!” So truth is out, which was part of modernity. Modernity was trying to get behind the text and trying
to find the historical roots and origins which produced nothing at all, because they [modernists] were not the people, as we will see, who met the qualifications. They had blinders over their eyes. The Bible, to be read [and to be un–derstood], needs people who have the work of the Holy Spirit to help them to understand. We're going to talk about I Corinthians 2:14. But at any rate, that’s the great revolution that came at that particular time.

The Greek word hermeneia means “to interpret.” And to interpret, as understood in those days, was like our Lord Jesus, who began with Moses and began with the prophets, and He interpreted. He explained all things concerning Himself. So what then is the relationship between this which is called hermeneutics and another word I’ll introduce, which is exegesis? We’ll be finished with this in just a little bit, but you need a couple of technical terms. Eγό, in Greek, means “to go or to bring.” And [the prefix] ex, as you might assume means “from.” So exegesis is to lead from the text the meaning that is found in the text. Well the relationship between exegesis and hermeneutics is that hermeneutics gives the rules, and exegesis is really the game played. Exegesis is the practice itself. So one is the rules and the other sets up the practice of what it is. And we do have another word, along with exegesis, which is eisegesis. This little preposition here in Greek, [eis], means “into” and “to lead” (ego here)—to go or to bring or to lead into. So rather than trying to have the text here—and you derive out of the text “ex,” this one says “eis”— I take it from some other place [in the Bible] and read it into the text. This is a no-no, eisegesis, because that is imposing something on the text, whereas exegesis is leading it from the text. So those are some basic definitions between exegesis and interpretation.

We divide up all the study into two divisions. We have general and special interpretation or hermeneutics. General interpretation [sets forth] the rules that apply to the whole Bible. What are the general rules that cover everything? And special [hermeneutics] takes up special parts that we will be looking at in these lectures. [These include]: what are the rules for interpreting parables? What are the rules for interpreting prophecy? What are the rules for interpreting proverbs? You can’t interpret a proverb literally, because some of the proverbs were given side by side with opposite meanings. For example, Proverbs 27: “Answer a fool according to his folly.” Next verse, “Answer not a fool according to his folly.”

So you say, “What’s my verse for today? Do I or don’t I?” Well it depends on the person. Some people, you answer them and [“smack”], “Man,” they say, “I needed that. That was just a smack
(verse). Boy that brought my attention.” But other people, you tell them [the same thing], and it doesn’t help them at all. It just pushes them the other way. So why waste your words?

I was working my way through college and seminary outside of Philadelphia. There we were talking with various individuals and this whole matter of listening to the texts and what they said [came up]. We had many, many discussions at lunchtime and other times about how in the world would you interpret various things. And one day out of the lunchroom came one of the fellows, Tony, who is kind of the loudspeaker [bragger] for the whole group. And he saw me and knew I was studying for the ministry, so he said, “Hey deacon,” he knew my name, but he gave me a title, “Hey, deacon” He said. “Come here and convert me, convert me.” And so I thought, “Uh, oh! Here comes the ‘oink, oink principle,’” because you don’t throw your pearls out to the pigs (Matthew 7:6). They trample on them. The pigs have no idea what they’re worth.

So I waited for Tony. I said, “What’s the matter, Tony?”

And he says, “I need to be saved. I need to be saved.”

And I said, “Tony, who told you you need to be saved?”

“Well,” he says, “my old lady says I need to be saved.”

I said, “Why did she say that?”

He said, “I drink beer on Sunday.”

“Well,” I said, “that’s not the only point, but I bet there are others as well.”

Then the other guys started confessing his sins for him. “If his woman [wife] knew what he did,” and on and on they went you know.

So I said, “Tony, here I’m paying all this money to go to school to learn how to tell you, and you know already point number one—you’re in bad shape before God.”

“Yeah, he’s in bad shape,” the guys confessed, and they began “helping” him.

And I said, “Well then, I’m supposed to tell you that someone did something about that.”

“Oh,” he said, “I know all about that.” He said, “I went to a Holy Roller church.” And He said, “There they were, rolling in the
middle of the aisle. And they were saying, ‘You’ve got to be born again; you’ve got to be washed in the blood.’”

I said, “See that, you know all that lingo?”

He said, “Yep. Yep! I know about it. Christmas and Easter.”

I said, “Yeah, Did you know He died for you too?”

“Yeah, Tony, did you know that?” The guys jumped on him.

I said, “Tony, I really feel embarrassed, but with all my study, there’s only one thing left.”

And he said, “What? What?” And he put his chin up just like that where you could “pile it” really good. And he said, “What? What? What’s that?”

And I said, “I’m supposed to tell you do something about it.”

And [he said], “Oh, let me out of here, let me out of here.” And he was gone.

“Answer a fool according to his folly.” He wanted to know, “Could I be saved?” If I took him seriously and gave him point 1, point 2, and point 3 [in their usual seriousness], he’d muck all around like a pig going, “oink, oink.” But, on the other hand, I felt like I should give him some background. Anyway, I had the “audience” to help me.

Later on, he found me on another part of the yard where I was working that summer. He said, “Hey, Reverend!” I got a promotion. “Hey, Reverend! What’s the Good Book say about divorcing?”

I said, “The Good Book says a lot about divorcing, but it says a lot more about being converted.”

And he said, “Let me out of here.” And he was gone again.

Well special hermeneutics deal with proverbs like that [throwing your pearls before swine], and they deal with the apocalypse, like the book of Revelation, or prophecy.

What are the limitations of hermeneutics? Mere knowledge of the rules doesn’t equate to good application of them. You can have people that are very very good on knowing the rules of hockey but are not good hockey players. There’s a difference between the game and the rules. And so there is too here, as well. That’s a limitation.
And then [second, there’s a limitation] because we are sinners—
depravity. There is this whole matter that sin has affected every
part of our being. Sin has infiltrated our thinking, our emotions,
our will that causes us to bring handicaps into the interpretation
process. I need the Holy Spirit to help me get by and point out
those blockages that are there.

And then, thirdly, a good knowledge and a good understanding
of the [whole] Bible is an enormous aid in interpreting the Bible,
because the Bible is a unified book. It is the one plan of God.

I just got [received from my publisher] a couple days ago kind of my
“magnum opus.” I’ve been work–ing on for 40 years The Promise
Zonder–van just released this, but what I try to do there is to talk
about: what is that mind of God that starts in Genesis and goes all
the way through the 66 books to [the book of] Revelation? There
is a harmony, and the parts belong to the whole. And if you’re
going to talk about trees in the forest, you’ve got to know what
the forest is about. So we’ll talk about that in the third lecture
here of context—the context of the whole Bible, as opposed to
the context of a book, [and] as opposed to the immediate context
we’re teaching on. Those are all various parts of that.

What about qualifications? We’ve talked about definitions, we’ve
talked about divisions, we’ve talked about limitations, now let’s
talk about qualifications. Spiritual things must be spiritually
interpreted. There is a real difference between knowing something
cerebrally, or academically or intellectually, and getting it down
into our being—into our heart.

One of the great lectures I had was at a Jewish University, Brandeis
University, was by a professor whose grandfather was the leading
writer on personal evangelism in the United Methodist Church
many, many years ago. He was long past that—Professor Erwin R.
Goodenough. We used to say behind his back, “Give me that old-
time religion and it’s Goodenough for me.” But Dr. Goodenough,
Professor Goodenough, did not think it was good enough. And he
just took every moment that he had to give cracks against this
[Bible]. Well one day (he’d never [prepare a formal] lecture). He
always said, “I’ve got a whole, full shelf of books like this [books
he wrote],” and he did. “Put a nickel in ‘er’ and ask me questions,
otherwise we’ll sit for 2 hours. I get paid for sitting here, and that
is [what’s in] my contract.” And he was serious. So we used to
meet ahead of class and line up the questions so we could get a
serious lecture from him.
Well one day he got mad, and he lectured. And someone said something that “ticked” him off about, “justification means that God makes me righteous.” Ooh, he went [mad]! (I heard more theology out of him in cursing than I did in teaching). But he got so angry! “What the blankity-blank do you mean about that?” He said, “God declares us righteous.” And with that he went into the book of Romans. And he said [taught] for 45 minutes: chapter 1 . . . chapter 2 . . . and chapter 3. And he came to the end of chapter 3. “So all have sinned. You, you, you, you.” Well half of [the class] were rabbis around the table. They began smoking (those were days when you could smoke in the classroom). And I was at the opposite end of the seminar table; I could not see him. There was some kind of “Shekinah Glory” that was between the two of us with great clouds because there was so much smoke.

And he said, “You, you, you, you all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.” And then he went on into chapter 4: “And you see Abraham was declared righteous. David was declared righteous! It doesn’t mean, ‘This is all liberal stuff or this Neo-orthodoxy was blankity, blank, blank.’ [You who say], ‘What it says to me is what it means to me,’ what do you mean ‘it means to me?!’” He said, “I’m an old-time liberal. That’s what it said!”

Well one of the fellows (spoke) up, and he had a cigarette in the corner of his mouth (he hadn’t quite mastered that yet), but he was talking with it in the side of his mouth, and he said, “Do I get from this that the professor of this class believes this stuff?”

Even I could tell what the answer would be when he asked the question like that. I remember he said, “Brahhh.” I tried writing it down. I didn’t know how to write that phonetically, so I’ve left a blank in my notes, and I remember that by oral tradition. But he said, “Brahh, who said anything about believing this? But,” he said, “you better put down that’s what Paul said. That’s what Paul said, and that’s what Paul meant! And I don’t care what you think it means, because I don’t know you, and I don’t even regard you. But,” he said, “I regard Paul and that’s what he said.” “But,” he said, “as for me, what it means to me and what I do with that,” he said, “that’s altogether separate!”

Then I understood what it means in that great passage, I Corinthians 2 [verse 14], where he makes the point. Here Paul concludes, “The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God for they’re foolishness to Him. Neither can He understand them because they’re spiritually discerned.” Then I understood [this verse].
This word here, “he does not accept,” in Greek, apotekamai, “he doesn’t welcome,” (Hello, Hello!) and take that in. No, No! He doesn’t welcome that at all. Why? Because the man without the Holy Spirit can’t. Because he doesn’t have the aid of the Holy Spirit. We need to respond. So the interpreter here must be born again. The interpreter must have a passion for God’s Word. Where did we lose the passion for God’s Word? The greatest neglected thing (everything except your churches, but I’m thinking about the others), the greatest neglected thing is the Word of God. You can’t talk about the Word of God or just refer to it. That Word itself has power. And when it’s cut loose, it cuts through all kinds of cultural stuff, every kind of attempt to be “relevant” and to be “up to date.”That Word of God can do that, because the Spirit of God is talking to us in this day and age.

I was down in Houston with a group of pastors, and was one of the speakers along with Sunday Adelaja. Sunday Adelaja is a Kenyan African-American who never knew his father. He was chased out of the 19-hut village he grew up in. His mother died when he was 3, and his grandmother, who raised him, died when he was 15. He continued through [school] going out in the forest cutting firewood and selling it so he could finish high school. When he finished high school, someone told him to apply to the Soviet Union; they have free scholarships. He [won a scholarship and] went to the Soviet Union, learned Russian, and in 6 years got his advanced degree in journalism. But he felt that God wanted him to preach. But the people there had not seen African-American [preachers], they made all kinds of fun of him [and] all kinds of references to chocolate. He said, “They called me a chocolate rabbit. They asked me what I did to my monkey tail. Did I cut it off when I put my clothes on?” [Such terrible ignorance and racism]. He said, “All that went on, but nevertheless, God called me. And,” he said, “I began to preach the Word of God.” Largest church now in all of Europe, 50,000 [people]. He has seen 2 million, (did you hear me? 2 million people) in Kiev, Ukraine, come to the altar to receive Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior [to know Him]. Two million in that church. [All of this happened] in a communist country! He began under communist regime. Why? He said, “That Word of God has power, has power!”

He’s written an interesting book, well one of the numerous books, but the latest one is Church Shift. And what’s the shift? The shift is the church. It’s not the building, but it goes out from there. And everyone is employed and does some aspect [of the work]. You’re in the drug culture, good! Go back to that drug culture and win
them to the Lord. You’re part of the homeless, good! Go back there and win them to the Lord. And you don’t do it with church funds. You’ve got great gifts. One fellow he brought with him [from the States] said, “I was in the drug culture. I am 22 years of age now, and received Christ 4 years ago. I have a ministry. I have expertise in investments. I make a million and a half US [dollars] per year; I invest [most of ] that in winning people to the Lord from the drug culture.” He said, “That’s what the gospel means to me.”

[So one] must be born again, must spiritually understand, must have a passion for God’s Word and must have an awesome reverence for God. I did a book recently [for] Baker Publishing called The Majesty of God—10 passages in the Old Testament that speak of the greatness of God’s majesty. It has just helped me over and over again. When my view of God and my view of the Word of God shrinks, it’s because I don’t understand the truth, the awesomeness, the sheer magisterial aspect of His personhood. That in itself sort of gripped me constantly as I [was writing].

And then, we must depend (I Corinthians 2:14) on the work of the Holy Spirit. Why? These things are spiritually discerned.

Now what equipment do we need in order to really interpret the Bible? Well one of the first things is that we’ve got to see the forest. What is our overall view? Can we tell the story of the Bible as it begins in Genesis and ends here in the book of Revelation? It starts in Babylon, it ends in Babylon, interestingly enough, [at] the Tower of Babel. And where’s the great commercial center [in Revelation]? The Board of Trade? It’s not in New York City. The board of trade apparently is in Babylon. Well Babylon, some interpret, say [it] may mean Rome, may mean something else. Okay, but still, Babylon to Babylon. Moreover, God starts with His people in the Garden of Eden, and we end with the new heavens and the new earth in the garden of God once again. This is what we call a bracketing or a figure of speech called an inclusion, an inclusio, where the beginning and the end are very similar. And out of this, the whole story centers around seed—the seed of this woman who has descendants, and so does the serpent, (always with the article, the serpent). He has descendants too. But there is one male descendant. All of a sudden it switches to not it—as in the King James—not she—as in the [Roman Catholic of 1609] Douay version—but he (as in Hebrew). He has his heel nicked by the serpent, but He in turn tramps on the head of hannachash, the serpent.
Now this was called the first denouncement of the gospel all through the history of the church, and they [the church fathers] said, “Do you see what’s happening here?” In this takedown, there is this promise of the one who is going to be sort of the head of the many. This is one of the principles in biblical interpretation that again, in the culture of that day, it’s a little different than our culture. But what we have here is this whole contrast between the one versus the many, or the one in which it includes the many. The technical name for this is corporate (there you get the many) solidarity (and here you get uniting in the one.)

This Seed always, I think, should be spelled with a capital where it refers to the Messiah that is to come. This Seed was given a promise of a total victory over that old dragon—the serpent, the devil. That’s how it’s described in the book of Revelation. And so the serpent here is crushed. Later on, Romans (we’ll pick this up), Romans 16: “Now may the God of peace crush Satan under the feet of all of us shortly.” So how is this corporate solidarity?

This occurs so frequently [corporate solidarity]. For example, in the Joshua story about Achan, we have trouble understanding how it could be that one man sinned and yet all sinned. And therefore the battle [at Ai, Joshua 8] was lost in the book of Joshua. Remember when they went up against Ai. They went against this city of Ai, [and] Achan was “achin’” to take some of the stuff (that’s how you remember it), so he hid it in his tent. And because of that, judgment came on the whole group. They lost 30 some men in that first occasion here.

I know of only one place in 2008 where I can describe this for you [corporate solidarity]. Let’s suppose I buy a new car. Let’s say General Motors or GMC, and I go in and buy the car. (Normally I buy Japanese cars—not because I don’t like America’s but I just heard that one of them was the kind the apostles drove. That is in the book of Acts. They were all in ‘one accord.’ So I assumed that that was a biblical car.)

Let’s suppose I buy a GMC [car]. And I take it out and find it has a problem. I bring it back. They say, “Mr. Kaiser, we’ll fix this for you.” So I trust them, I come back, pick up the car, it still has the problem. Actually, I bring it back the biblical number of times—70 times seven. On the 491st time, I lose it (you’re not supposed to but I do). I say, “This is a hunk of junk. What are you guys pawning off on me?”
They say, “Mr. Kaiser, we’ve done everything we can.”
I say, “You’re not going to be able to fix it?”
They said, “No.”
I said, “Why?”
They said, “This car was made on Friday afternoon, and therefore it is just going to have that problem. You bought what is called a ‘lemon.’”
So I say to them, “Are you guys born again? Do you know Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior?”
They said, “Huh? No.”
I say, “Okay, I sue you” (See, you check first, right? And so they’re not born again, so I tell them, “I sue you”).
When we go to court, guess what the legal brief says? It says, “Kaiser versus GMC.” This is a “legal fiction” they tell me in law. This here [GMC] functions as one person, and I’m one person; that’s corporate solidarity there. But you know and I know that GMC is a huge thing [company]. There is one man up here, the CEO. Then there are all these boards of directors, and then there all these employees, and then there are all these stockholders. I mean, it’s enormous. This is called corporate solidarity. Through the one, you have the many. That’s how it operates there with regard to the Seed too.
All of us are Abraham’s seed (Galatians 3:28). But the Seed is one (Galatians 3:16), which is Christ. Excuse me: “Paul, don’t you know new math? Even on new math you have that sort of bad there [mixed up].”
“No, no,” he said, “This is corporate solidarity.” Therefore, in a good survey of the Bible, I become used to these kinds of concepts where I see this problem of the Seed. You say, “Yeah, but did Eve understand this?” I think so. In Genesis 4:1, it said, “Adam knew his wife Eve (carnal knowledge, she became pregnant) and she bore a son.” And she called his name, “Got”—Cain—because “I’ve gotten a man from Lord.” There’s a little pun there. He called him Cain (Cainod, got) because Cain means to get. So then she says, “I’ve gotten a man…” Now I know our English texts say, “with the help of the Lord.” And I know the King James Bible put “with the help of” in italics. But that’s not where you hit the pulpit and say, “With the help of,” But actually it means it’s not in the
original then. Well if it’s not in the original, “buh–bye.” What did she say? Luther translated it in the German Bible just right. He said, “I’ve gotten a man, even the Lord.” I think her instincts were right; her timing was way off. She thought that there was going to be the Seed who was none less than the Lord Himself. And she thought that was Cain, but missed it by a country mile. If you look it up, the Hebrew text just says, “I’ve gotten a man,” (well put the comma in because that is English), then it has the direct object’s sign, et, and then it has Yahweh. So it says, “I’ve gotten a man, the Lord.” That’s all it says. “I’ve gotten the man, the Lord” So a good survey of the whole Bible should help us enormously here.

We also should have a good concordance. I grew up in a country home—a farm, up against the city limits of Philadelphia. And my folks had several of these things here, because mom and dad taught Sunday school classes. And they had a Strong’s Concordance. Strong’s, they say, for the strong; Young’s for the young; and Cruden’s for the crude. Cruden’s only has a part of them [verses] there. Young is a little easier to use. Strong is exhaustive and exhausting. It has every a in the Bible, every the in the Bible—I don’t know why you would want to look that up, but I suppose there are some. But it has ev–erything. A concordance is helpful because you say, “Where was that? What was that?” I remember one Sunday after I finished teaching in Wheaton Bible Church in Illinois, and a man called me and he said, “I need your help. My son was driving on the Pennsylvania Turnpike and they had a breakdown and they couldn’t get off the road. And one of the college students with them was sleeping in the back of the car and an 18-wheeler came and killed the girl.” He said, “I need a verse. It’s in my mind, but I can’t think where it is. ‘Will not the Judge of the whole earth do what’s right?’”

At that point I had a memory of that but couldn’t put my finger on it. I quickly pulled the concordance out. I said, “Genesis 18 [verse 25], ‘Will not the Judge of the whole earth do what’s right?’”

A good Bible dictionary or encyclopedia is also important. Why? Because there are a lot of names, there are a lot of places, there are a lot of things. For example, in I Samuel they [the Israelites] said that they would go to the Philistines, and the Israelites had to have their plowshares and their spears sharpened and they would charge them a pim. Well I needed a dictionary. We don’t have pims. And so I looked that up and sure enough, we have an archaeological find, which was a unit of money that was used at that particular time. So that would give us the background and the backdrop to that.
[We need] a history of the Bible, just to know who are all of these people? Okay, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians. But the Meunites? Who in the world are they? Now this is where a history of the Bible and an archaeological book can be very, very helpful.

A Bible atlas too [is helpful. We recently published an Archaeological Study Bible, published by Zonder-van, which is quite helpful in this area.] Some of the Bibles have very good maps in the back of them. My former colleague, Barry Beitzel [Trinity Evangelical Divinity School] has helped with most of the Bibles now where have satellite views of almost all of the Ancient Near East. That’s helpful.

And a commentary—commentaries are amazing in what they really don’t tell us sometimes, or what they try to tell us. If the commentary goes on for 10 pages on a point, they probably don’t know, and they are just going on and on. But it would be helpful to have it there.

And then another, a book of Bible difficulties—I participated in one called Hard Sayings of the Bible (InterVarsity Press produced that). There are certain of the sayings in the Bible that are difficult, and sometimes it’s helpful to have a reference you can pull down and check against that as to what was said (or how to evaluate the difficulty).

Well, just before I give you some time for discussion questions, let’s just kind of review our first introductory lesson. We have said, then, that this whole business of interpretation is a science (I don’t think I mentioned this to you) and an art too as well. The science comes from the rules; the art comes from the skill given by the Holy Spirit to apply those rules. Just like there’s a difference between the rules, hermeneutics, and exegesis, which is the game of actually going to the text, [determining what it says,] and trying to lead the meaning out of that text.

And we talk about general and special hermeneutics [and the difference between]. General [hermeneutics] for the whole Bible—there are principles, such as we’re going to talk about, of what must I go back to find out what that person, that author, that human author that stood in the counsel of God meant when he wrote those words. Or can I bring new meanings to the text? Or can I find out that there are hidden meanings in the text? There are so many these days who are saying, “The Bible must be interpreted spiritually and allegorically, and there are deep, deep meanings.”
I remember I was in a panel one time, and I said, “Now we have got to be careful about that.”

They said, “Like what? What would be an example of a message that is kind of underneath the text? It’s not really there, but it’s in a mystery form, it’s hidden in an allegory or spiritualized?”

Well I said, “For example, in the Gospels, Jesus and the Disciples are out on the Sea of Galilee. And you know, we’re all out there in the boat, the boat is the church. And there are all these waves that are coming in. And down on the boat is coming all of this stuff that’s hitting the church. There is big spending and big government and big taxes and all this stuff is coming down on us. And the great question is: Have you put in your oar? Are you trying to help the church get to the other side?”

“Now,” I said, “I don’t think that the Holy Spirit or the apostle meant that at all.”

But one man said to me, “Well what’s wrong with that? I preached that last week!”

I said, “It’s a good sermon, but it’s a bum text. That text doesn’t say that. You don’t have the authority and the sufficiency of the Word of God that stands behind that [meaning]. You’re the authority for that until you find another text that really says that!”

Then on limitations: The interpreter must be born again. The interpreter must have a passion for God’s Word and reverence for God and treasure the ministry of the Holy Spirit in his heart. And then the equipment, as we say, are some of these tools that make the job easier. You can do it on your own, but you’ll have to have loads of time if you’re going to go thumbing through the whole Bible to find out where all the references are without a concordance. A concordance is a way of cutting it down. Or in these days, just Google it, which becomes the new word for “anything you don’t know.” And it’s surprising; some of it’s good. So much for our start.