

Interpreting Scripture

Rockey Jackson, April 22, 2018

“All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.” (2 Tim 3:16-17)

This article looks at many things that should be considered when interpreting scripture. Just like the other articles in this Foundation Series, it is meant to affirm, liberate and empower the redeemed saints of God.

The Scriptures must be understood at both the macroscopic and the microscopic level. The macroscopic overview of the Bible provides the framework where all of the microscopic details are attached. The Bible can't explain everything in a single verse. That's why it is easy to take a single scripture out of its biblical context and come up with a faulty interpretation. Every passage of scripture is like a single small tile in a large mosaic picture. It must not clash, but harmonize with the rest of the picture.

The Scriptures are infallible, but what is available to redeemed saints today is far removed from the language and the culture in which they were written. Even precise translations often miss a colloquialism, pun or other device of language that was intended in the original. The world view and the doctrinal beliefs of the translator also creep into any translation. This needs to be kept in mind when demanding a specific interpretation of a single scripture. By God's design, the entire Bible is an integrated message system. It has been designed to deliver its message even if it is damaged or parts are missing. As long as an interpretation is in harmony with all of scripture then it can't miss the mark by much.

There are at least twelve levels that we need to consider when we want to fully understand what the Bible says:

1. Word (dictionary or lexicon definition)
2. Phrase (language structure/grammar)
3. Sentence (statement/declaration)
4. Paragraph (subject/topic)
5. Book's context
6. Bible context
7. Writer's context
8. Cultural context
9. Historical context
10. Theological context
11. Translator's context
12. Holy Spirit inspiration (most important).

Each level of interpretation increases the depth of understanding, but number twelve is obviously the most important. In fact, if someone wants to save a lot of time they can skip one through eleven and go straight to twelve. The Holy Spirit inspired people to write the Holy Scriptures and the Holy Spirit is the true author who knows the correct interpretation. As it says in 2 Peter 1:16-21:

“For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His majesty. For He received from God the Father honor and glory when such a voice came to Him from the Excellent Glory: "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." And we heard this voice which came from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain. We also have the prophetic word made more sure, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts; knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.”

Understanding that scripture is inspired must be the starting point. However it must also be understood that every scriptural interpretation, even when it begins with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, still comes through a person. This means that there is always the possibility that it is corrupted. Everyone should be like the Bereans and question every person's interpretation of scripture, especially their own. They should search the Scriptures to find the truth. This is encouraged in Acts 17:11, ***“These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so.”***

This comes back then to number six, the context of the Bible. As the Scriptures are searched to see if what has been stated is true or not, three related questions need to be asked about each passage:

1. Is this an absolute?
2. Is this an example?
3. Is this an exception?

Absolutes are usually a one-time occurrence that must be either true or false. Something like Jesus was or was not the Son of God. Mary either was a virgin when she gave birth to Jesus or she was not. Only one or the other is true and it is absolutely true. On the other hand, examples and exceptions usually involve large numbers of people and multiple occurrences.

Here is an example from Revelation 5:1-4, ***“And I saw in the right hand of Him who sat on the throne a scroll written inside and on the back, sealed with seven seals. Then I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, "Who is worthy to open the scroll and to loose its seals?" And no one in heaven or on the earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll, or to look***

at it. So I wept much, because no one was found worthy to open and read the scroll, or to look at it.” This scripture involves a large number of people, in fact, everyone who has or ever will live. If it is an absolute that “no one was found worthy to open and read the scroll” then God has a big problem. It will be impossible for Him to redeem the world from Satan. He might as well give up and close the book because He has lost and the forces of darkness have won. Is this scripture indeed an absolute? Maybe it is only an example and there might be an exception. In this case the search doesn't need to go too far. The very next verse Revelation 5:5 says: ***But one of the elders said to me, "Do not weep. Behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has prevailed to open the scroll and to loose its seven seals."*** Thanks be to God that although no one is worthy to open the scroll and redeem the earth, an exception is found. The Lion of the tribe of Judah is worthy to redeem the earth.

An example is the rule, the norm. An example is the way things usually are. Exceptions are the occurrences that break the rules. Exceptions do not mean that a rule is not a rule. The very fact that they are exceptional is support for the rule. As almost everyone has been taught, “The exception proves the rule.” As the Bible is interpreted, care must be taken so that examples are not interpreted as absolutes. Neither should exceptions be made into examples. A search needs to be made of the scriptures to see if they are an absolute, an example, or an exception.

At some point in our lives, many of us have had someone get in our face and declare in a shrill manner: “No one means no one!” or “All means all!” We may even have been that person on occasion. One passage of scripture with absolute sounding words has been made the keystone of a cherished doctrine and then all other scriptures are interpreted according to that doctrine. This is unfortunate. Our doctrines must be developed from the correct interpretation of scripture. The Scriptures must not be interpreted according to our doctrines. When scripture is interpreted according to doctrine the danger of misinterpreting should be obvious. A good question to ask is: “Without this doctrine, would this scripture be interpreted this way?” Like the Bereans, we should search the Scriptures to see if the absolute sounding words are indeed absolute or if they are an example with one or more exceptions to the rule.

Biblical prophecies add one more consideration in their interpretation. When a prophet is shown the future, they usually see it in two dimensions like a picture. When a picture is viewed objects like mountain peaks can be seen in succession if they are taller than the one in front of them. However the valleys between the mountains are not seen and what the valleys contain is unknown. The distance between the mountains is also unknown. So a prophecy of scripture may begin in the present (for the prophet) and end in the distant future without a hint of transition. Care must be taken to determine the time the prophecy is for and not to assume that everything in the prophecy will occur in rapid succession.

The Bible is a wonderful gift that God has given to us. It is an objective revelation of His nature, His plan to redeem us to Himself and much more. There are many useful ways to characterize the Bible. The Old Testament tells the story of the Jews while the New Testament tells the story

of Christians. The Old Testament emphasizes what people must do to be acceptable to God by their works. The New Testament clearly states what God is willing to do to make people acceptable to Him by faith. Many have noted that the New Testament is in the Old Testament concealed and the Old Testament is in the New Testament revealed. From the beginning with the story of Adam and Eve, God revealed that it was by the shedding of innocent blood that a person's sins would be forgiven. In the story of Cain and Able He showed that prideful offerings of self-righteous religious works were unacceptable to Him while offerings of humble obedient faith were acceptable. The entire plan of salvation may be found throughout the Old Testament if we only look for it. In the book of Acts, every evangelistic sermon is based entirely on Old Testament texts. Throughout the New Testament, the Old Testament is quoted and explained.

In the Bible God reveals His desire to have an intimate relationship with the people He created. He has always wanted for them to willingly desire a faithful relationship with Him. For those who have received Him as Lord, He has accepted them, given them grace and forgiven their sins. For those who have rejected relationship with Him and demanded to know what works they must do to be acceptable to Him, He has given the law that they must obey perfectly or they will be judged unacceptable to Him. Self-righteous people of religion worship the Book of the Lord (or whatever text they consider to be holy). They follow the letter of the law as they have interpreted it from the Scriptures. The redeemed saints of God worship the Lord of the Book. In faith, they obey the spirit of the law that the Lord has written on their hearts as they are led by the Holy Spirit. This has been true from the beginning.

How then do we correctly interpret scripture? First in importance is to recognize that the Scriptures are inspired by the Holy Spirit. Since the Holy Spirit inspired the Scriptures, it is very important to allow Him to guide us in our interpretation. The study of many other levels of interpretation can aid us in the depth of our understanding. Of note among these is the Biblical context. The microscopic details must correctly be attached to the macroscopic structure of the Bible. As we interpret we need to determine if a scripture is absolute, exemplary or exceptional. Every interpretation of scripture, even when inspired by the Holy Spirit, still comes through a person and it is subject to corruption. So we should question every person's interpretation of scripture, especially our own. We should follow the example of the Bereans and search the Scriptures to see if our interpretations and doctrines are indeed true. Knowing all of these things makes it easier for us to correctly interpret the Holy Scriptures. Finally, we should keep an open mind to the thought that we still have more to learn from the Bible.