

Principles of Biblical Interpretation

Today we will look at several principles for interpreting the Bible. To read the Bible is to understand it; to understand the Bible requires interpreting it. Without explanation and interpretation, it is naturally impossible to comprehend the Scriptures. Yet we know that everything has its principles. The nobler and more momentous a matter is, the stricter its laws and principles become. Only trivial, indifferent things that can be done arbitrarily have no fixed laws, principles or rules. Any legitimate matter with standing, value, importance and greatness is bound to have inherent principles and laws, and cannot be handled casually.

In the universe, the Bible is an incomparably great work. Apart from our glorious Lord and God, I believe the most significant thing in all creation is this Bible we can see with our eyes and touch with our hands. Given the Bible's supreme importance, we cannot read and understand it without proper interpretation. Such interpretation must follow fixed rules, laws and principles. We may not interpret it according to our own whims, understanding it one way whenever we please and another way as we fancy.

Therefore, once we know what the Bible is, how it was written, and how it was gradually translated into various languages and placed in our hands as a book we can read and preach, we need to discover the laws and principles of reading and interpreting it. These principles not only help us understand the Bible, but also keep us from making many errors.

All rules serve as safeguards. Without railway tracks, trains cannot run smoothly, nor are they safe. With tracks laid down, trains travel with both convenience and protection. The same applies to Bible reading. To read and interpret the Scriptures blindly and arbitrarily makes understanding difficult and carries great risk, often leading to mistakes. Our thoughts are often undisciplined; if we draw conclusions according to random thoughts and interpret according to personal bias, we walk in great danger. Hence, to read the Bible well and grasp its meaning accurately, we need

standardized interpretation. And standardized interpretation requires us to establish solid principles and laws of biblical interpretation. Here we outline ten such principles.

1. Interpret Literally to the Fullest Extent

The first principle: interpret and understand the biblical text strictly according to its literal wording. We must hold fast to this truth—when God inspired the Bible, He spoke entirely in human language that we can comprehend. Therefore, when we seek to understand the Bible today, we must grasp God's meaning precisely and strictly according to the literal sense of its words.

We must not assume that because the Bible is divinely inspired, it transcends human language, and then resort to arbitrary spiritual allegorical interpretation. This is extremely dangerous. We must interpret the Bible literally. No matter how difficult or unreasonable the literal meaning may seem to us, we must adhere firmly to the literal sense.

Let us take several obvious examples. In the Old Testament, the Book of Isaiah prophesied that the Lord Jesus would be born of a virgin. Today that prophecy has been fulfilled, and we read of it without surprise. But when Isaiah first wrote these words—"Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel"—human reasoning would surely stumble at this truth. A virgin giving birth is naturally hard for the natural mind to accept. Many might therefore resort to allegorical interpretation, claiming the "virgin" was not a literal maiden but something symbolic. Yet when the prophecy was fulfilled, it came to pass exactly according to the literal meaning: a true virgin, without the slightest deviation.

Another example is the Book of Zechariah in the Old Testament, which prophesied the Lord Jesus' final entry into Jerusalem riding on a donkey's colt. At that time, readers might find this hard to comprehend. How could the King worthy of praise, hailed with "Hosanna", the most revered figure of Israel, enter the city riding a humble young donkey? Human logic might deem this unreasonable, leading again to

allegorical speculation. Yet the prophecy was fulfilled precisely as written literally: the colt was a real donkey's colt.

When we read the Bible, we should indeed receive spiritual revelation, but we must not replace literal interpretation with unfounded allegory. Only certain prophecies and figurative expressions in Scripture, if taken literally, would appear absurd and nonsensical—only in such rare cases may we adopt spiritual allegorical interpretation.

Discerning when to interpret literally and when to use allegory requires careful discernment and great caution. I have heard some interpret the locusts in Revelation as modern airplanes, and hailstones falling from heaven as bombs dropped from aircraft—such interpretations are utterly ridiculous. Let us therefore be prudent and refrain from arbitrary interpretation. If you wish to see bizarre, absurd interpretations of biblical prophecies, you may read the Signs of the Times published by the Seventh-day Adventist Church, where interpretation is completely unrestrained and random. We must not follow such ways. We must uphold the principle of literal interpretation to the fullest extent. Only visions, prophecies and parables whose literal reading would be utterly absurd warrant allegorical interpretation.

2. No Mixing Literal and Allegorical Interpretation Within a Single Sentence, Verse or Passage

Within one sentence, one verse, or one passage of Scripture, we may not interpret the first part allegorically and the latter part literally, nor vice versa. The entire segment must be interpreted either fully allegorically or fully literally.

For instance, in John chapter 3, the Lord Jesus said, "Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God." Many interpreters allegorize the word "water" here as referring to God's word, yet take "the Spirit" literally as the Holy Spirit. This method is inconsistent and violates the principle of interpretation. If "the Spirit" is taken literally, "water" must also be literal; if "water" is allegorized, "the Spirit" must be as well. Since "the Spirit" cannot be allegorized here, "water"

must also be understood literally.

Another example is Matthew chapter 3, where John the Baptist declared: "I indeed baptize you with water; but One mightier than I is coming... He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, gather the wheat into His barn, and burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." Many interpreters allegorize "fire" here as trials and tribulations, or as the Holy Spirit refining like fire. Yet in this verse, John speaks of "water" as literal water and "the Spirit" as the literal Holy Spirit. Therefore, "fire" cannot be allegorized and must also be taken literally. If "fire" were allegorical, "water" would need to be as well—which is unacceptable. This is a vital principle of interpretation: the context must maintain consistency, either fully literal or fully allegorical, never a mixture of both.

2. No Single Verse Can Represent the Fullness of Truth

We must also bear in mind that no single verse of Scripture can convey complete truth. In other words, no divine truth can be fully explained by one isolated passage alone. Hence in reading and interpreting the Bible, we must heed the words spoken by the Lord Jesus in Matthew 4:7: "It is also written..."

When the Lord was tempted, the devil quoted Psalm 91, claiming God would command His angels to protect Him, urging Him to leap from the temple pinnacle in false assurance of divine promise. This was the devil twisting a partial Scripture to tempt the Lord Jesus. Immediately the Lord replied, "It is also written: 'You shall not tempt the Lord your God.'" This teaches us we cannot rely merely on one isolated portion of Scripture; we must consider the full testimony of God's word from multiple angles.

To ignore the principle of "it is also written" and rely solely on partial Scripture is to fall into the devil's scheme. If Satan cannot stop us from following the Bible altogether, he will tempt us to follow only a partial interpretation of it. Of course, Satan would prefer us to disregard Scripture entirely, yet he knows he cannot sway

those who love and reverence the Lord from obeying His word. Instead, he uses another stratagem: leading us to cling to one isolated view while ignoring the rest of God's revealed truth contained in "it is also written".

The word also is profoundly significant and worthy of our close attention. It reminds us to build our understanding not on isolated verses, but on the balanced, complete testimony of Scripture. Just as no single side of a house can represent the whole building, no single photograph of a person (whether front or back) can capture their full likeness—so too, no single Bible verse contains the fullness of divine truth. We must consider the whole counsel of God. Let us therefore hold fast to the principle of "it is also written".

4. Every Verse Contains the Whole Body of Truth

While no single verse can fully express one complete truth, every verse nevertheless contains the entirety of divine truth. This means that although one verse alone cannot exhaustively explain a specific truth, requiring us to consult many other verses for full understanding; conversely, establishing any divine truth demands considering every verse of Scripture. Every single verse holds within it the full revelation of God's truth.

A fellow believer once rightly said: Every verse of Scripture requires the entire Bible to interpret it. To understand Genesis 1:1, one must understand the whole Bible. On one hand, Genesis 1:1 does not contain complete truth in isolation; on the other hand, it encapsulates all the truths revealed throughout Scripture.

Therefore, we must never formulate doctrinal conclusions based on a single passage alone, but upon the entirety of God's word. Likewise, interpreting any individual verse cannot rely merely on its immediate context, but must be illuminated by the whole Bible. 2 Peter 1:20 states: "No prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation." The original meaning of this verse is that no prophetic Scripture may be interpreted solely by its isolated wording. To properly understand any biblical prophecy, we must compare it with all other prophecies in Scripture and interpret it in

the light of God' s complete revelation—only then can we grasp its full meaning.

5. Never Dismiss or Sacrifice Minority Verses

When establishing a doctrinal truth, most related Bible verses may seem to support one interpretation, while only one, two or a few verses appear inconsistent. We must not dismiss these few difficult verses and adopt the majority interpretation while ignoring the minority. To do so is to sacrifice those overlooked verses, which we must never do.

If even one or two verses contradict a particular interpretation, that interpretation must be rejected. We must honor every portion of Scripture; only when all verses harmoniously align with a conclusion is that conclusion reliable. Whenever any verse conflicts with a proposed interpretation of a truth, we must not set that verse aside. Instead, we should pause our interpretation and wait humbly for God' s revelation. Adopting this approach to Bible reading will keep us from falling into error.

6. All Parallel Couplet Verses Are Equal in Meaning

The Bible contains many parallel couplet verses. In such passages, each corresponding line carries equal weight and meaning, without disparity.

Consider the Beatitudes in Matthew chapter 5: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." These are classic parallel couplets. In each Beatitude, the first half states the condition of blessing, and the second half states the blessing received. In all parallel verses, the structure is consistent: if the first part is a condition, all corresponding first parts are conditions; if the latter part is a blessing, all latter parts are blessings. This is another fixed principle of interpretation.

7. Neither Be Bound by Cultural Background Nor Ignore It

Interpretation must neither be constrained by the historical and cultural background of Scripture nor disregard it entirely.

For example, many of the Lord Jesus' teachings on the mountain carry a Jewish cultural context. When He said, "Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you..." the act of bringing a gift to the altar is rooted entirely in Jewish religious culture. To grasp the original meaning of these words, we cannot ignore this background. In ancient Judaism, bringing offerings to the altar was an act of drawing near to God and communing with Him. Grasping this principle reveals the Lord's true meaning: He speaks of believers coming before God with offerings and fellowshiping with Him. Thus we must not ignore cultural background, but understand it properly.

Conversely, we must not be bound by that background. We cannot take the Lord's words about bringing gifts to the altar and teach that we ought to perform the same ritual today. To be bound by the original cultural context leads to serious error. We must strike a balance: ignore the background, and we lose the accurate meaning of Scripture; be enslaved by it, and we fall into legalism and mistake.

8. Observe Distinctions Between Dispensations

God's words to mankind in the Bible are dispensational in nature. Some were spoken under the dispensation of the Law, others under the dispensation of Grace. We must distinguish these dispensations when interpreting Scripture and never apply teachings from the Law dispensation to the Age of Grace.

The error of the Seventh-day Adventists in keeping the Sabbath illustrates this point. Sabbath observance was a commandment given by God under the Law dispensation; it has no place in the Age of Grace today. Yet Adventists cite Exodus chapter 20, arguing that since God commanded the Sabbath, we must keep it now. It is

true God commanded the Sabbath—but that was for the dispensation of the past, not for the present Age of Grace.

Similarly, certain Psalms declare that children born of the flesh are a blessing. This belongs to the Old Testament dispensation; the New Testament never affirms that physical offspring are a divine blessing. I would not call physical children a curse, but they are undeniably a burden and a trial. In the Age of Grace today, only spiritual children are true blessings.

Another contrast: under the Old Testament, God promised His people earthly prosperity and enlarged borders. The New Testament stands in complete opposition. It is utterly wrong for preachers today to quote Old Testament promises to claim that reverencing God guarantees earthly abundance and wealth for every household. Such promises were given under the Law, not under Grace. The New Testament instead calls believers to abandon land and property, sell their possessions, and give to the poor—a direct contrast to Old Testament blessings.

Though all Scripture is God-breathed, we cannot arbitrarily apply teachings from one dispensation to another. Catholicism and many Protestant denominations often err in this way. Many Catholic rituals, priestly robes and worship customs are borrowed directly from Old Testament Judaism. While these practices are mentioned in Scripture, they do not belong to our present dispensation. When interpreting the Bible, we cannot simply argue, "This is in Scripture, so we must obey it." We must first identify which dispensation a verse belongs to; teachings intended for another dispensation have no binding application for us today.

9. Note the Different Audiences Addressed

We must also identify the intended audience of each biblical passage. Some words were spoken exclusively to the Jews, with no application to Gentiles or the Church; some to Gentiles alone, unrelated to Jews and the Church; others directly to the Church, separate from Jews and Gentiles.

1 Corinthians 10:32 states: "Give no offense to Jews or Greeks or the church of

God." Throughout Scripture, God's words are addressed to at least three distinct groups: Jews, Gentiles, and the Church. Most Old Testament Scriptures were spoken to the Jews. A large portion of the New Testament is addressed to the Church, with other portions directed to Gentiles in both Old and New Testaments. When reading, we must first clarify the audience—whether to Jews, Gentiles, or the Church—before drawing accurate conclusions and interpretations.

Debate has long surrounded the intended audience of the Gospel of Matthew. Many interpreters insist it was written solely to Jews, not the Church. They point to its Jewish cultural references: the altar offerings, the Jewish Sanhedrin court, the "abomination of desolation" standing in the holy place, and the warning to pray that flight not occur on the Sabbath—all seemingly pointing to a Jewish audience bound by Sabbath observance. If this were true, the entire Gospel of Matthew would not belong to us as believers today.

Yet careful study reveals that Matthew chapter 5, though set against a Jewish backdrop, was spoken to the citizens of the kingdom of heaven—not merely ethnic Jews. The citizens of God's kingdom include both saved Jews and redeemed Gentiles; they are the Church. Since many kingdom citizens came from a Jewish background, the Lord naturally used familiar Jewish cultural references in His mountain sermon. Chapters 24 – 25 are even more nuanced: sections are addressed respectively to Jews, the Church, and Gentiles. Matthew 24:1 – 31 speaks to the Jews; 24:32 – 25:30 to the Church; 25:31 – 46 to the Gentiles. To interpret and apply Scripture accurately, we must first confirm its intended audience.

**10. Do Not Treat Old Testament People, Events and Things as Types Unless
Explicitly Designated as Such in the New Testament; Only Use Them as
Illustrations**

The Old Testament contains many divinely ordained types: individuals such as Isaac typifying Christ as the heir, and Rebekah typifying the Church as Christ's bride; events such as the Passover foreshadowing salvation through the slain Christ, and the

Exodus typifying believers' deliverance from the world; objects such as the lamb and the bronze serpent both typifying Christ.

Yet we may not arbitrarily designate Old Testament people, events or objects as types based on our own speculation. We must only recognize them as types if the New Testament explicitly confirms them. Where the New Testament gives no clear teaching that an Old Testament person, event or thing is a type, we must not assert it as such. We may only borrow these Old Testament elements as figurative illustrations to explain New Testament truths. To label something a type carries profound doctrinal weight; using it merely as a parable or illustration is a lighter, permissible use without forcing typology where Scripture does not establish it.

We have briefly outlined these ten principles of biblical interpretation. For centuries, even over a millennium, these principles have been refined and distilled from the collective experience of countless godly Bible students — like cream and honey, they are infinitely precious. May we commit them firmly to heart as our guide and standard. From this day onward, may all brothers and sisters apply these principles to reading the Bible. As we do, we will discover new depth in Scripture, understanding it more accurately, clearly and profoundly.