

How to Interpret the Bible Correctly¹

The Apostle Paul, writing to Timothy, commanded believers to “*rightly divide*” the Word of God i.e. “*cut it straight*” (2 Tim. 2:15). The statement probably harkened back to Paul’s trade of tent-making, and the importance of cutting each piece of animal skin straight, in order to avoid producing a crooked tent when the pieces were sewn together.² The importance of reading the Bible daily cannot be overemphasized. However it’s equally important that we know how to correctly interpret what we are reading. It’s not difficult but it does entail following some basic principles. Listed below are several of the most important guidelines for Bible interpretation. Their importance cannot be overemphasized, since virtually every person in a false religion or cult violates these principles, to their eternal detriment.

1. **Interpret Literally.** i.e. *Naturally or Normally.* This is often called the “*Golden Rule of Bible Interpretation.*” David Cooper stated it well:

“*When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense*”

a) **The example of Christ & the Apostles:**

- *Moses*-Mk. 12:26; Jn. 6:46-47
 - *David*-Mk. 12:36-37
 - *Jonah*-Mt. 12:39
 - *Noah & the flood*-Mt. 24:37-39; Lk. 17:26-27
 - *Lot & Sodom & Gomorrah*-Lk. 17:28-29 cf. Jude 7
 - *Daniel*-Mk. 13:14
 - *Adam*-Rom. 5:12-14
 - *Abraham*-James 2:21-ff & *Sarah*-I Pet. 3:5-6
 - *Cain & Abel*-I Jn. 3:11-12. (above from Charles Ryrie)
- b) **Other examples from Scripture:** Creation vs. Evolution-Ex. 20:11; The Millennium-Rev. 20:1-6; etc.

2. **Interpret Grammatically.** – Pay attention to the words & wording, verb tenses, punctuation, etc.

Examples:

- **Tit. 2:13** – Christ is clearly called both God & Savior in this verse. Many cults wrongly deny Christ’s deity.
- **Rom. 9:5** – This verse again asserts that Christ is God. Cf. Jehovah’s Witnesses, Muslims, etc., who deny it.
- **Mt. 25:46** – Many false teachers deny that hell is forever. But if it’s not, neither is heaven, since the same exact word is used to describe the length of both.
- **Mt. 16:18** – This passage does not confer special power on Peter. It’s a play on words, based on the meaning of his name (Peter [*Petros*] = little stone, Rock [*Petra*] = large foundation stone or bedrock).
- **Gal. 6:2 cf. v. 5 & Acts 9:7 cf. 22:9** – checking the words with a concordance can sometimes solve a seeming contradiction.

3. **Interpret Historically/Culturally.** – The more you know about the history, culture, geography, etc., of the writers & events described in the Bible, the better you will understand and interpret it.

Examples:

- **Dt. 33:12** – “...and he shall dwell between his shoulders” – imagery is of a woman with a baby in a string bag or bilum, suspended on her back.
- **Ps. 119:105** – “*Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path*” – refers to small foot & hand lamps used in Bible times.
- **Lk. 15:8-10** – *The lost coin* – a woman’s wedding dowry-To lose one of the coins was to greatly disrespect her husband.

¹ This material has been adapted from my syllabus “*How to Interpret the Bible Correctly.*” The main points & outline, plus many of the examples were taken from “*Tools for Preaching & Teaching the Bible*” by Dr. Stewart Custer. Other illustrations are from books by Alfred Edersheim, Robert Gundry, Charles Pfeiffer, James Freeman & Victor Matthews. –*Mike Edwards* – revised August 2015.

² From the writings of Dr. John MacArthur, Grace Community Church, Sun Valley, California.

- **Mt. 14; Mk. 6; Lk. 9 & Jn. 6** – *The feeding of the 5000* – Jews believed Messiah would miraculously feed the people like Moses and that it would occur at Passover.
- **Jn. 19:30** – “*It is finished*” — This word/phrase was often written across bills & meant “*Paid in Full!*”
- **Gal. 3:24-28** – “*Schoolmasters*” – imagery of a relative or nanny who leads a child to school i.e. The Law leads to Christ.
- **Lk. 11:51** – “*From Abel to Zechariah*” – Christ here declares what comprised the OT canon & which books of the OT were inspired i.e. Gen-Malachi.
- **Mt. 21** – *Riding a donkey* – A king on a horse spoke of war. A donkey spoke of peace. An empty one means the nation is leaderless.
- **Jn. 7:37-39; 8:12** – “*If any man thirst... I am the light*” – There is a deep meaning from the Feast of Tabernacles which was occurring at that time. (Alfred Edersheim, *Jesus the Messiah*, pp. 583-89)
- **Rev. 3:14-18** – “*...you’re lukewarm & poor & blind & naked...*” – The town of Ephesus was famed for its banking, eye salve & black wool. Jesus thus used what they were proud of instead to rebuke them.

4. Interpret Contextually. – “*A text without the context is a pretext!*” (Jones, Jr.)

Examples:

- **Ezek. 37:15 cf. vv. 19-22** – The “*two sticks*” – context states: the sticks = the future restoration of Israel & Christ’s kingdom rule.
- **Isa. 11:1-2 cf. vv. 3-11** – Many cults claim that this is their leader. But the context shows that it is Christ alone & that it is yet future.
- **I Cor. 2:9 cf. v. 10** – we don’t know everything about heaven, but we do know some things. Note v.10 cf. Rev. 4, 5, 21 & 22..
- **Mt. 18:18-20 cf. vv. 15-17** – “*where two or three are gathered...*” – The context is church discipline, not prayer mtgs.
- **Phil. 2:12-13** – “*work out your salvation*”? – This is not “works” salvation. The meaning rather, is that if God is working in you, it will show out in your life.
- **Phil. 4:13** – “*I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.*” – i.e. whether God gives you little or plenty, you can make it by His grace.
- **Rev. 7 & 14** – The “*144,000*” – these are *Jews* during the tribulation, *not* members of cults like the Jehovah’s Witnesses!
- **II Thess. 2:3** – “*falling away*” then a “latter-day” restoration? *Hardly!* – Mormons (LDS) try to use this to endorse Joseph Smith their false prophet, but the context clearly says no.
- **Gen. 31:49** – “*The Lord watch between me and thee*” – This was not a romantic utterance but rather a thinly-veiled threat.

5. Interpret According to the Harmony of Scripture – Ultimately, *the ENTIRE Bible is the context!*

Examples:

- **Jas. 2: 14-26 cf. Gen. 15 & 22** – all of Scripture teaches salvation by faith w/o works. This passage in James does too, if read right.
- **I Cor. 7:12 cf. v. 10 & Mt. 5 & 19** – “*I speak, not the Lord*” – This is not a denial of inspiration by Paul for what he wrote here. Rather, Paul was giving additional info in addition to what Jesus had said.
- **Isa. 9:6 cf. 10:21** – Christ is called “*Mighty God*” in 9:6. It must mean equal with God the Father, since the same name is used of God the Father (Jehovah) a chapter later!
- **Jn. 14:13-14 cf. Ps. 66:18; Jas. 4:2-3; I Jn. 5:14-15; Jn. 9:31** – Does praying “*in Jesus’ name*” guarantee that we can get *anything*? No! God gives conditions, as well as promises about prayer.
- **I Pet. 3:21 cf. I Cor. 1:17** – baptism definitely does *not* save or cleanse from sin! Salvation is through faith alone!
- **Eph. 2:8-9; Tit. 3:5; Gal. 2:16; Rom. 3:20, 28; 4:2, 5, 10, 13** – Salvation is by grace through faith, not of works!
- **Isa. 53:5 cf. I Pet. 2:24; etc.** – the healing in Isaiah 53 refers to our sin & iniquity, *not* physical healing.