

God's Glory in God's Word

Revisiting R.C. Sproul's "Knowing Scripture"

3 Rules for Interpreting Scripture

Rule #1: The Analogy of Faith: letting Scripture interpret Scripture

- No Scripture can be interpreted in conflict with what is clearly taught elsewhere in Scripture.
- The inerrancy of Scripture pre-supposes this. Apparent contradictions are just that – apparent.

Rule #2: Interpreting the Bible Literally-the Bible should be interpreted according to its literal sense – what message is the writer trying to convey?

- Litera – meaning “letter” – we must pay attention to the words being used.
- A noun is a noun; a verb is a verb; historical narratives are historical narratives; etc.

Genre analysis: poetry, historical narrative, hyperbole, personification, metaphor – we must also consider the type of writing – saying we interpret the Bible literally is dangerous if we are not also considering the genre of writing. Instead of assigning different meanings to the same text, the literal view of interpretation seeks to find a singular meaning – and context, literary type, etc. can help us to determine that single meaning.

Metaphor

Joh 6:48 I am the bread of life.

Joh 6:56 Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him.

Historical Narrative

Num 22:28 Then the LORD opened the mouth of the donkey, and she said to Balaam, "What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?"

Rule #3: The grammatical-historical method – focusing attention on literary forms, grammatical constructions, and historical contexts

- understanding the grammatical structure of Greek or Hebrew can help to determine whether words are questions, commands, or declarations.
- Historical analysis – consider the setting and situation in which books of the Bible were written.
- Source criticism – we should consider why an author is writing.

Summary from R.C. Sproul:

The three primary principles of interpretation are aids to our personal enrichment. (1) The analogy of faith keeps the whole Bible in view lest we suffer from the effects of exaggerating one part of Scripture to the exclusion of others. (2) The literal sense offers a restraint from letting our imaginations run away in fanciful interpretation and invites us to examine closely the literary forms of Scripture. (3) The grammatical-historical method focuses our attention on the original meaning of the text lest we “read into Scripture” our own ideas drawn from the present. Sproul, R. C..Knowing Scripture . InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

Practical Rules for Biblical Interpretation

#1: Read the Bible Like Any Other Book

- Remember the historical-grammatical method - Sensus literalis – a verb is a verb, a noun is a noun, etc.
- In saying this, we are not discounting the value of prayer or the necessity of the Holy Spirit.
- But through prayer, the Bible does not change basic literary patterns of interpretation.

#2: Read the Bible Existentially

- We should be passionately and personally involved in what we read.
- Understanding why God does things – according to Scripture – will help us overcome difficulties we may have with Scripture - what are some examples of troublesome passages where, unless we fully understand what is going on, we may hold prejudice against what it says?

#3: Interpret the Historical Narratives by the Didactic (to teach or instruct)

- This is a general approach to Scripture that says, in general, the emphasis in the Gospels is found in the record of events, while the Epistles are more concerned with interpreting the significance of those events in terms of doctrine, exhortation, and application. Consequently, the general application is that the Epistles should interpret the Gospels rather than the other way around.
- Example: observing Christ's behavior in the Gospels does not create a manual of required Christian behavior. We do not have the same mission as Jesus – we are not sent into the world to die for the sins of our people.
 - We do not drive out corruption with a whip
 - We do not fulfill all the laws of the Old Covenant
 - The teachings of the epistles clarify what it means to imitate Christ – they are part of Christ's command to obey whatever I have instructed you.

#4: Interpret the Implicit by the Explicit

We must be careful with assumptions that do not come from the text.

Example: Mar 12:25 For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. **Question: Are angels sexless? Will we be sexless like they are?**

Example: Joh 20:19 On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." **Question: did Jesus' body now have the ability to float through closed doors?**

Rule: When an implication is drawn that is contradictory to what is explicitly stated, the implication must be rejected.

#5: Determine Carefully the Meaning of Words

Context, and a careful study of how words are used in Scripture, can help us to understand the author's use of a particular word in a particular place.

#6: Note the Presence of Parallelisms

"Parallelism may be defined as a relationship between two or more sentences or clauses that correspond in similarity or are set with each other."

a) Synonymous parallelism: two lines present the same thought

Pro 19:5 A false witness will not go unpunished, and he who breathes out lies will not escape.
Isa 53:5a But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities;

b) Antithetic parallelism: two lines present contrasting thoughts

Pro 13:1 A wise son hears his father's instruction, but a scoffer does not listen to rebuke.

Psa 1:6 for the LORD knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

#7: Note the Difference Between Proverb and Law

Proverbs reflect wisdom for godly living, but they are not to be given the same weight as law. While proverbs are incredibly useful, following them does not guarantee results but are rather present the "normal" result.

Pro 22:6 Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it.

Pro 22:15 Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline drives it far from him.

Also, consider that giving a proverb the same weight as law can result in unintended contradictions:

Question: Do we answer a fool or not?

Pro 26:4 Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself.

Pro 26:5 Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes.

Question: Are you for me or against me?

Mat 12:30 Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.

Luk 9:50 But Jesus said to him, "Do not stop him, for the one who is not against you is for you."

#8: Observe the Difference Between the Spirit and the Letter of the Law

Rather than merely focusing on the words, Jesus points us to the intent. Sproul: "To obey the letter while violating the spirit makes one technically righteous but actually corrupt."

Mat 5:21-22 "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' (22) But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire.

#9: Be Careful With Parables

What is the Purpose of Parables?

Mat 13:10-14 Then the disciples came and said to him, "Why do you speak to them in parables?"

(11) And he answered them, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. (12) For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. (13)

This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. (14) Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says: "'You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive.

Sproul: "The safest way to treat the parables is to look for one basic central point in them."

#10: Be Careful With Predictive Prophecy

Example 1: The coming of Elijah

Mal 4:5-6 "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. (6) And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction."

John says he is not Elijah

Joh 1:19-21 And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" (20) He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ." (21) And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" And he answered, "No."

Luke says John goes in the spirit and power of Elijah

Luk 1:16-17 And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, (17) and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared."

Jesus says John is Elijah

Mar 9:11-13 And they asked him, "Why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?" (12) And he said to them, "Elijah does come first to restore all things. And how is it written of the Son of Man that he should suffer many things and be treated with contempt? (13) But I tell you that Elijah has come, and they did to him whatever they pleased, as it is written of him."

Mat 11:13-14 For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, (14) and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come.

Example 2: Signs in the heavens

Joe 2:28-32 "And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. (29) Even on the male and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit. (30) "And I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. (31) The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. (32) And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved. For in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape, as the LORD has said, and among the survivors shall be those whom the LORD calls. – According to Peter, the events on the Day of Pentecost fulfill this prophecy (Acts 2:14-21)

Concerning the King of Egypt: Eze 32:7 When I blot you out, I will cover the heavens and make their stars dark; I will cover the sun with a cloud, and the moon shall not give its light.

Concerning Babylon: Isa 13:9-10 Behold, the day of the LORD comes, cruel, with wrath and fierce anger, to make the land a desolation and to destroy its sinners from it. (10) For the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light.

Concerning the “tribulation” Mat 24:29 "Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken.

#11: Interpret the Bible with a Spirit of Humility

“Christians who respect biblical authority have a special burden to read right. We, too, are prone to fall into error. In fact, none of us is absolutely right about what God’s Word really means. That is why we must ourselves return daily to the Bible—reading and rereading, thinking and rethinking, obeying what we grasp, correcting our earlier readings as new insight is given us, constantly crosschecking our grasp of Scripture with our pastor, our fellow Christians and with the historic understanding of Scripture by orthodox Christianity”. – James Sire

Sproul, R. C.. Knowing Scripture. InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.