

## *Making Sense of the Bible*

I rented a car at Chicago's O'Hare Airport. The key was in the ignition so I started it up and drove to an appointment just north of the Loop along the Near North Shore. I parked the car and turned off the engine but I couldn't pull the key out of the ignition. For fifteen minutes I tried without success. My passenger couldn't figure it out; the parking lot attendant couldn't figure it out. There were no instructions in the glove box. Because our appointment time had arrived the parking lot attendant agreed to watch the car, so we left it parked with the key in the ignition. Later someone told me that there is a button behind the key. Push the button and the key comes out. It was simple and easy. It made sense—if you knew how the system worked.

The same can be said about the Bible. There are people who can't figure out how the Bible works. They can't make sense of what it says. They tried but nothing happened. So they have parked the Bible on a shelf and walked away, leaving it for someone else to figure out.

I don't want to mislead you. There are parts of the Bible that are hard for some of us to understand. But just as you don't need to know how to program your car's computer in order to drive it, so you don't need to master Hebrew and Greek to understand the Bible.

The Bible is God's message to us. God did not send it in code to keep it a secret. God did not make it difficult. God wants us to read and understand what he wants to communicate to us. We just need to understand a few rules for reading and what buttons to push to make sense of God's Word.

Throughout this series we have focused on "Where the Bible came from", "How we got the Old Testament" and "How we got the New Testament". With this message we move from the origins of the Bible to the understanding of the Bible. The topic for this message is interpretation. We will conclude this series by learning in the next message how to apply the Bible's teachings and truth to our personal lives. But first, here

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are nine basic rules to help us understand the Bible and what it says.

Rule #1 is to expect the supernatural. The Bible is not like other books; it comes from God. This changes our whole approach to the Bible. Our expectations should be entirely different.

If you visit another country and culture you go with expectations that are different from your expectations at home. In China you expect to eat with chopsticks not with knives and forks. In Australia you expect to drive on the left side of the road not the right side of the road. In central Africa you expect the weather to be hot rather than cold. Your expectations shape your experience. If you go to Australia and expect to drive on the right side of the road you probably will have a bad experience; it won't work well. You will be disappointed and may end up dead.

When reading and studying the Bible ask God for help. Ask God to speak to you, to teach you and to help you understand. Expect something supernatural to happen. Expect to experience God through the Bible.

There is a wonderful benediction in Romans 16:25 that recognizes that there are supernatural truths about God that would be a mystery if we did not learn them from the Bible:

Now to him who is able to establish you by my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey him—to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen.

Expect the supernatural!

Rule #2 is to seek the original meaning. This may be the most broken rule when people read the

Bible. We need to look for the original intent of the original writer and the original understanding of the original reader of the Bible. We need to read the Bible as if it were written 2000 to 3000 years ago by Jews living in the Middle East—

because it was!

Daniel is a book about prophecy and the future, at least in part it is. Daniel 11:40 says, “*At the time of the end the king of the South will engage him in battle, and the king of the North will storm out against him with chariots and cavalry and a great fleet of ships.*” Does that mean that there will be a great battle at the end of history in which the United States will be attacked by the army of the king of Mexico and the army and navy of the king of Canada? Of course not! We must read and interpret the Bible from the perspective from which it was written. The land to the north was Syria (not Canada) and the land to the south was Egypt (not Mexico).

Another example of seeking the original meaning is to determine the type of literature the author was writing. The Bible contains narrative history, poetry, similes, metaphors, exaggerations and various figures of speech. Take Matthew 19:24 for example: “*It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.*” This is hyperbole or overstatement. It is intentional exaggeration to make a point. Normal camels can’t fit through normal needles. It is a figure of speech.

In Psalm 98:8 it says, “*Let the rivers clap their hands, let the mountains sing together for joy.*” That’s poetry. Poets use beautiful expressions to communicate wonderful truths. No one ever thought that rivers have hands to clap or that mountains sing soprano, alto, tenor or bass. It was written as poetry and should be read as poetry.

In Matthew 1:23 we read, “*The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel—which means, ‘God with us.’*” This is not a figure of speech. It is not exaggeration. It is not poetry. This is history. It is a miracle. While it may be a difficult miracle for some to believe, there should be no doubt what was the original meaning and intent when it was written—Mary was a virgin when Jesus was born.

This is one of the most important rules to follow in order to understand the Bible: Seek the original meaning every time you read the Bible.

Rule #3 is to look for the main truth. It is a mistake to try to find deep hidden meaning in obscure details of the Bible while ignoring the main point that is being made. For example, the story of David and Goliath says that David chose

five smooth stones to use in his slingshot when he went to fight the giant. It is a disservice to the Bible to focus on the five stones and overlook God’s supernatural help in the shepherd killing the giant and saving the nation of Israel.

One of the most famous parables of Jesus is found in Luke 10:25-27:

On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

“What is written in the Law?” he replied. “How do you read it?”

He answered: “ ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ ”

“You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.”

But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

In reply Jesus said: “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’

“Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”

The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.”

Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.”

What is the main truth? Is it that we should watch out for robbers? Is it that priests don’t care

about injured people? Is it that donkeys are good for transportation when you are sick? No, the main point is that we are to love our neighbors and that our neighbors are those with needs.

One of the most flagrant transgressions of this rule is made with biblical prophecies from books like Daniel and Revelation. Some people find things that must make God laugh. Sadly, focusing on irrelevant details may mean missing the message of God. The main point of biblical prophecy is that God is in control. Whenever you read the Bible always look for the main truth.

Rule #4 is to let the Bible interpret itself. Many of the answers to our questions about the Bible are actually in the Bible. For example, Deuteronomy 24 explains the rules for divorce in the nation of Israel. Does this mean that God takes marriage lightly and approves of divorce? If there were just the teaching of Deuteronomy it would be hard to understand. However, Malachi 2:16 further explains that God hates divorce. So, if God hates divorce why does God allow divorce? Jesus explained that in Matthew 19:8-9:

“Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery.”

The point here is not so much to talk about the Bible’s strong defense of marriage and tolerance of divorce under limited circumstances, the point is that the Bible often gives us the extra information we need to understand the Bible.

If you read the stock quotes in the daily newspaper you may have trouble figuring out what they mean, but usually there is a little box at the top of the column that explains the symbols and numbers. In other words, you go someplace else in the same section to learn how to interpret the numbers that you’re interested in. The same principle applies to the Bible. Look for the explanation in the Bible.

Rule #5 is to read meaning out of the Bible not into it. Don’t go to the Bible with your mind

made up about what you want it to say and then force your interpretation into the verses.

In especially flagrant violation of this rule one man sought to justify his immoral behavior from the Bible. He took quotes from here and there throughout the Old Testament and strung them together in illogical and inconsistent ways to show that the Bible encouraged premarital sex, extra-marital affairs and other immorality. He made up his mind and forced his opinions into the Bible in order to justify his immoral lifestyle.

Some have done this with political presuppositions. Taking the words of Jesus in Matthew 26:11 where Jesus said, “*The poor you will always have with you*”, they have argued against social programs to help the poor. The truth is that the most basic reading of the Bible shows great compassion for the poor and overwhelming teaching to help the poor. Jesus even said in Matthew 19:21, “*If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.*” All that is to say that when we approach the Bible it should be with an open mind and a teachable spirit. Come to listen to God, not to seek reinforcement for personal opinions and prejudices.

Rule #6 is to respect the context. Don’t find a line you like and ignore the words that come before and after. This reduces the Bible to little more than a dictionary where we put the words together in our own combinations and make them say whatever we please. We dare not do that with the

Bible. When we want to find out what the Bible is teaching we must read the entire chapter, not just a single line. Find out who is talking to whom. Read what precedes and what follows because the only way to make sense of a story is to know the context of

the story. If we don’t read the context we are playing a silly game with a serious book.

Rule #7 is to discern what the Bible approves. There is a big difference between what the Bible reports and what the Bible approves. The Bible reports adultery, murder, stealing, rape, idolatry, greed, gluttony, polygamy, slavery and a lot of

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other behaviors that are condemned by God. To properly interpret the Bible is to constantly discern what God likes and doesn't like.

Rule #8 is to decide whose promise it is. Not every promise in the Bible is for all of us. Acts 3:6 says, "*In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.*" When facing paralysis from a disease or accident there may be temporary satisfaction in taking lines from the Bible about disabled persons being told to walk, but these were promises to specific individuals in specific situations. They are not promises to everyone who is disabled.

Some people claim for themselves promises that were made to Israel for land, to poor people for money, to sick people for health or to infertile people for children. Please understand that God can and does do wonderful miracles for his people, but we cannot claim someone else's promise as if it were our own. The Bible also promises disease, difficulty and death for specific people under specific circumstances. Usually we don't want to claim negative promises for ourselves.

The Bible is loaded with fabulous promises; some are given to all people, some are just for Christians. There is no shortage of promises for us. Just make sure that the ones you claim are promises God made to you and not to someone else.

Ninth and last among the rules is to check out what others say. Christians have been studying the Bible for 2,000 years. They have discovered answers to almost any question any of us might have. They have dealt with the misunderstandings. We would never think to start over with inventing our own cars or trying to manufacture our own penicillin. We take advantage of the experience and wisdom of others. Do the same with the Bible.

There are lots of Bible study tools available to us. Buy a study Bible. Get a volume Bible commentary. Own your own and buy these as presents for others. Take classes. Ask others. Just a few conversations or phone calls or Bible classes at church or through Bible Study Fellowship or a neighborhood Bible study can be enormously helpful.

Nine rules. If I had to sum them all up in a single lesson it would be to use common sense when understanding the Bible. Read it with the same approach you would apply to most other books you read.

But, most of all, read the Bible. Study the Bible. Find out what God has to say to you. Plan to read the Bible through in a year. To do that you just need to read 3 or 4 chapters a day. If that's too ambitious, read one book per month or read for 10 minutes per day or 15 minutes per week. But, read it. This is God's book for you!

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 6630 Shady Oak Road  
 Eden Prairie MN 55344  
 952-944-6300  
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