

## **How To Read The Bible For All It's Worth (Summary)**

***Gordon D.Fee & Douglas Stuart***

*The following content is a summary and partial abridgement of Fee And Stuart's book "Reading The Bible For All It's Worth." It is based solely on Fee And Stuart's work and any help that this content gives should be credited to God's grace through their effort. In other words, give God glory, thank Fee and Stuart and buy the book.*

### **PREFACE:**

One of the main objectives in writing this book is the goal of describing and explaining the different genres of the books of the bible. There are large differences in how one might go about reading one of the Epistles compared to the strategy of studying a Psalm. Along with this goal is the desire of the intelligent reading of scripture. The study of exegesis and hermeneutics as well as the application of these theories within everyday study and obedience to God.

***Exegesis:*** Literary commentary; the careful, systematic study of the Scripture to discover the original, intended meaning. To find out what was the original intent of the words of the Bible.

***Hermeneutics:*** the process of applying the original text and it's intended meaning to become culturally relevant to the reader.

## **1. INTRODUCTION: *THE NEED TO INTERPRET.***

The aim of good interpretation is simple: to get to the plain meaning of the text. We tend to think that our understanding is the same thing as the Holy Spirit's or human author's intent. However, because of our backgrounds, knowledge, experiences, it is easy for our interpretations to become skewed from what God originally intended. The bible, in fact, that most of us read is already an interpretation from the language that it originally was penned in. This is another reason for close examination of Scripture and good exegetical study.

Another reason for the need to interpret exists because the way in which the Bible was created. It is the word of God given to people throughout history. Because God chose to speak to us in this way every book of the Bible has *historical particularity*. This means that every document is conditioned by the language, time, and culture in which it was originally written, as well as the oral history it had before it was written down.

One of the most important aspects of the Bible is the variety of ways in which God chose to speak to us: narrative history, genealogies, chronicles, laws of all kinds, poetry of all kinds, proverbs, prophetic oracles, riddles, drama, biographical sketches, parables, letters, sermons and apocalypses. To interpret the Bible correctly the reader must be able to not only understand the exegetical aspects of the content but also the genres in which the different books were written.

### **The First Task: Exegesis**

This process is mostly a historical one but is imperative if good hermeneutics can be accomplished. In the end a good understanding of the history, people, culture and intended meaning will be known. If a text is interpreted correctly it is impossible for it to mean anything

that the original author did not intend. This is crucial when trying to apply Gods word to our lives, in our belief, worship and understanding of him.

To begin exegetical study you must first learn to read text carefully while asking the right questions. There are two kinds of questions one should ask of every biblical passage, one on context and the other content.

### **1. Contextual - *Historical, Literary***

***Historical context*** should include defining what the time and culture of the author and his readers are. That includes the geographical, topographical and political factors that are relevant to the author's setting; as well as the occasion of the book; psalm, prophetic oracle, or other genre. It is important to have an understanding of why a certain kind of book needed to be written in a certain genre.

***Literary context*** simply means reading something within context. Words only have meaning within entire sentences and usually biblical sentences only have meaning in relation to proceeding sentences. The most important thing to ask is what is the author trying to say, how are they saying it, why are they saying it here and in this way, and what are they saying next. This line of questioning applies to all of the different genres that Bible is written in.

### **2. Content Related**

Content has to do with the meaning of specific words, the grammatical relationship in sentences, and the choice of original text where the manuscripts have variant readings. Basically you are trying to find the specific meaning of a biblical text.

**Tools of Exegesis:**

1. Bible Dictionary
2. Bible Handbook
3. Good Translation
4. Commentaries

**The Second Task: Hermeneutics**

This is the process that is used in seeking the contemporary relevance of ancient texts. This appears to be the most important aspect of studying the bible on a personal level but it is impossible to do good hermeneutics without having a very firm grasp on the practice of exegesis. This devotion to exegesis is to try and find the plain meaning of a Bible text. Without finding the true meaning of what the author intended, biblical texts can mean whatever any given reader wishes them to mean. The goal after all, of studying the bible, is to try and find the true meaning of God's intended word, not our own. Ultimately we want to know what the Bible means for us and how we can use that understanding to serve God, obey him, worship him and adore him.

## **2. THE BASIC TOOL: A GOOD TRANSLATION.**

### **The Science of Translation:**

There are two choices that a translator has to make; *textual* and *linguistic*. The first has to do with the actual wording of the original text. The second has to do with one's theory of translation. Because translators use a variety of methods for translating a text it has become a fairly exact science but not perfect. There are too many human variables to be exact. In these cases when multiple translations could emerge from a specific passage it is good to look at other interpretations of the Bible, as well as other resource material to try and get a better idea of what the author intended.

### **The Question of Language:**

The following terms will help you become familiar with the theories of translation. It is important to think about how each of these ideas apply to the specific text you are reading and how that might affect the translation.

***Original Language:*** The language that one is translating from; in the case of the bible Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. Hebrew being used for most of the Old Testament, Arabic (a sister language to Hebrew) used in half of Daniel and two passages in Ezra. Greek used for all of the New Testament.

***Receptor Language:*** The language that one is translating into.

***Historical Distance:*** This has to do with the differences that exist between the original language and the receptor language, both in matters of words, grammar, and idioms (a peculiar mode of

expression, the genius or peculiar cast of a language; colloquial speech; dialect), as well as in matters of culture and history.

***Theory of Translation:*** This has to do with the degree to which one is willing to go in order to bridge the gap between the two languages. Here are some terms that relate to certain aspects within someone's theory of translation.

*Literal:* The attempt to translate by keeping as close as possible to the exact words and phrasing in the original language, yet still make sense in the receptor language. A literal translation will keep the historical distance intact at all points. Examples of Bibles translated with this theory are The King James Version (KJV), The New American Standard Bible (NASB), and the English Standard Version (ESV).

*Dynamic Equivalent:* The attempt to translate words, idioms, and grammatical constructions of the original language into precise equivalents in the receptor language. Such a translation keeps historical distance on all historical and most factual matters, but "updates" matters of language, grammar and style. Examples of Bibles translated with this theory are The New International Version (NIV), The New American Bible (NAB), and The New English Bible (NEB)

*Free:* The attempt to translate the ideas from one language to another, with less concern about using the exact words of the original. A free translation, sometimes also called a paraphrase, tries to eliminate as much of the historical distance as possible. Examples of Bibles translated with this theory are The Living Bible (LB), and The Good News Bible (GNB).

### 3. THE EPISTLES: *LEARNING TO THINK CONTEXTUALLY.*

#### **The Nature of the Epistles:**

The Epistles are all of the New Testament except the Four Gospels, Acts, and Revelation. All of the Epistles are referred to as *occasional documents*, arising out of and intended for a specific occasion. They are also all from the first century. Almost all of the New Testament letters were occasioned from the reader's side. Usually the occasion was some kind of behavior that needed correcting, or a doctrinal error that needed setting right, or a misunderstanding that needed further light.

Much of the problems in interpreting the Epistles exist in the fact that they are occasional. We have the answers, but we do not always know what the questions or problems are. It is similar to listening to one end of a telephone conversation. The occasional nature of the Epistles also means that they are not first of all theological treatise. There is theology implied but it is *task theology*.

#### **The Historical Context:**

The *first* thing to do in reading the Epistles is to try and form an informed reconstruction of the situation the author is speaking to. To do this you can consult a bible dictionary or the introduction of a commentary. The *second* step, especially for study purposes is to read the letter in one sitting. This will help you grasp the big picture of the letter, examining every word will come later. Some things to jot down as you read might be:

1. What do you notice about the recipients themselves? e.g., whether Jews or Greek, wealthy or slave, problems, attitudes, etc.
2. The author's attitude
3. Any specific things mentioned as to the specific occasion of the letter

4. The letter's natural, logical divisions.

**The Literary Context:**

Here you want to begin to trace the argument as an answer to the occasion that required the letter. Define what the point of the letter is. (1) In a compact way state the content of each paragraph. (2) In another sentence or two try to explain why the author says what they say when they say it. How does this content contribute to the argument?

A good check to make sure that you have performed good exegesis is (1) to make sure that the exegesis is self-contained; that is, you do not have to go outside the text to understand the point. It is good to get additional information to help set the historical context but make sure that the conclusions you arrive at do not step out side the meaning of the letter. (2) Make sure that there is nothing in the text that does not fit into the argument. (3) When you are finished doing exegesis, there is clarity of the occasion that required the letter.

There will be times when it will be impossible to understand exactly the situation that the letter was written for, but in these cases the point of the letter can still be retrieved. Focus on what the letter means and you will have a good understanding of what the point is. Consulting a good commentary after you have done this work can be beneficial on checking your observations as well as providing insight into areas that you might have missed.

#### **4. THE EPISTLES: *THE HERMENEUTICAL QUESTIONS***

##### **The Basic Rule:**

When applying exegetical study to the practice of hermeneutics it is imperative to remember that a text cannot mean what it never could have meant to its author or his or her readers. This is why good exegesis is important to do before attempting to discover what the text means to you and how to apply it to your life.

##### **The Second Rule:**

Whenever we share *comparable particulars* (i.e., similar specific life situations) with the first-century setting, God's Word to us is the same as his Word to them. This is also what gives modern day Christians a sense of immediacy with the first century. To find what the comparable particularities are and to properly evaluate how to apply scripture you must perform a careful reconstruction of their situation.

##### **The Problem of Extended Application:**

When there are comparable situations and comparable particularities, God's Word to us in such texts must always be limited to its original intent. Furthermore, it should be noted that the extended application is usually seen to be legitimate because it is true, that is, it is clearly spelled out in other passages where that is the intent of the passage. The problem with extended application exists because in some situations it is impossible to know exactly what the original text means and therefore should not be extended.

##### **The Problem of Particulars That Are Not Comparable:**

The problem here has to do with two kinds of texts in the Epistles: those that speak to first-century issues that for the most part are without any twenty-first century counterparts, and those texts that speak to problems that *could* possibly happen also in the twenty-first century but are highly unlikely to do so. Here are two ways of helping with this situation. *First*, you must do exegesis paying close attention to hear what God's Word was to the original audience. You should find that a clear principle has been articulated, which will usually transcend the historical particularity to which it was being applied. *Second*, the "principle" does not now become timeless, to be applied at random or whim to any and every situation. It should truly only be applied to *genuinely comparable situations*.

### **Matters of Indifference:**

Here are a series of guidelines that might help in identifying matters of indifference.

1. What the Epistles specifically indicates as matters of indifference may be things such as:  
food, drink, observance of specific days, etc.
2. The matters are not inherently moral, but are cultural-even if its stems from religious culture. Matters that tend to differ from culture to culture, therefore, even among genuine believers may usually be considered matters of indifference.

Something very important to remember when dealing with matters of indifference is that a person that does not feel bound by something should not flaunt his or her freedom, just as a person who feels convicted should not condemn someone else.

### **The Problem of Cultural Relativity:**

(1) The Epistles are occasional documents of the first-century, conditioned by the language and culture of the first-century, which spoke to specific situations in the first-century church. (2)

Many of the specific situations in the Epistles don't apply to us as individuals in the twenty-first century. (3) Other texts are also thoroughly conditioned by their first-century settings, but the Word to them may be translated into new, but comparable settings. (4) This leaves other texts conditioned by the first-century that share some comparable particularities, leaving the question of whether or not these texts need to be translated into a new setting or simply left in the first century. The following guidelines will help you distinguish texts that are culturally relative, on the one hand, and those that transcend their original setting, on the other hand, and have a normativeness for all Christians of all times.

1. One should first distinguish between the central core of the message of the Bible and what is dependent upon or peripheral to it. An example of centrality would be the fallenness of all mankind, redemption from that fallenness as God's gracious activity through Christ's death and resurrection, the consummation of that redemptive work by the return of Christ, etc.
2. One should be prepared to distinguish between what the New Testament itself sees as inherently moral and what is not. Those items that are inherently moral are absolute and apply to every culture, for all time.
3. You must make special note of items where the New Testament itself has a uniform and consistent witness and where it reflects differences.
4. It is important to be able to distinguish within the New Testament itself between the principle and specific application. It is possible for a New Testament writer to support a relative application by an absolute principle and in so doing not make the action absolute.
5. It is important, as much as one is able to do this with care, to determine cultural options open to any New Testament writer. The degree to which a New Testament writer agrees with a cultural situation in which there is only one option increases the possibility of the cultural relativity of such a position.

6. One must keep alert to possible cultural differences between the first and twenty-first centuries that are sometimes not immediately obvious.

**The Problem of Task Theology:**

The difficulty here exists in that the Epistles are occasional in nature. They are focused on delivering theology through practical situations and sometimes do not speak directly to the questions that we have today. Posing a question about the morality of abortion is asking a great deal of the Epistles to perform because this was not an issue in the first-century. This does not mean that Scripture has nothing to say about abortion for example, but we need to take great care when applying theology from the Epistles to particular situations that were not present when the Epistle was written. Remember that our immediate aim is for greater precision and consistency; our greater aim is calling us all to greater obedience to what we do hear and understand.

## 5. THE OLD TESTAMENT NARRATIVES: *THEIR PROPER USE*

### **The Nature of Narratives:**

Over 40 percent of the Old Testament is narratives and since the Old Testament constitutes three-quarters of the bible it is no surprise that the single most common type of literature in the entire bible is narrative. Narratives are basically stories. Stories that we refer to as God's story—a story that is ultimately true, crucially important, and often complex. Their purpose is to show God at work in his creation and among his people. The narratives glorify him, and give us a picture of his providence and protection. They also provide illustrations of many other lessons important to our lives.

### *Three Levels of Narratives:*

Old Testament narratives are told on three levels. The *top level* is that of the whole universal plan of God worked out through his creation. Key aspects to this level are the initial creation itself; the fall of humanity; the power and ubiquity of sin; the need for redemption; and Christ's incarnation and sacrifice. The *top level* is often referred to as the "story of redemption" or the "redemptive history."

The *middle level* centers on Israel: the call of Abraham; the establishment of an Abrahamic lineage through the patriarchs; the enslaving of Israel in Egypt; God's deliverance from bondage and the conquest of the promised land of Canaan; Israel's frequent sins and increasing disloyalty; God's patient protection and pleading with them; the ultimate destruction of northern Israel and then of Judah; and the restoration of the holy people after the Exile.

Then there is the *bottom level*. Here are found all the hundreds of *individual* narratives that make up the other two levels. Every individual Old Testament narrative is at least part of the greater narrative of Israel's history in the world, which in turn is part of the ultimate narrative

of God's creation and his redemption of it. This ultimate narrative goes beyond the Old Testament and into the New.

You will not fully do justice to any individual narrative without recognizing its part within the other two. However there is nothing wrong with studying an individual narrative all by itself. But for the fullest sense you must finally see that individual narrative within its larger contexts.

*What Narratives Are and Are Not:*

1. They are first and foremost stories about what God did to and through people. The Bible is composed of divine narratives, God is the hero of the story.
2. Old Testament narratives are not allegories or stories filled with hidden meanings. But there may be aspects of narratives that are difficult to understand. In other words, narratives do not answer all our questions about a given issue. They are limited in their focus, and give us only one part of the overall picture of what God is doing in history.
3. They do not always teach directly. They emphasize God's nature and revelation in special ways that legal or doctrinal portions of the Bible never can, by allowing us to live vicariously through events and experiences rather than simply learning about an issue.
4. Each individual narrative or episode within a narrative does not necessarily have a moral all its own. Narratives cannot be interpreted atomistically, as if every statement, every event, every description could, independently of the others, have a special message for the reader. To try and find significance and meaning in each bit of data or each single event in the narrative will not work if not read in light of the larger context and story.

### **Principles for Interpreting Narratives:**

The following ten principles should help you avoid obvious errors in interpreting whenever you seek to exegete these and other stories.

1. An Old Testament narrative usually does not directly teach a doctrine.
2. An Old Testament narrative usually illustrates a doctrine or doctrines taught propositionally elsewhere.
3. Narratives record what happened—not necessarily what should have happened or what ought to happen every time. Therefore, not every narrative has an individual identifiable moral of the story.
4. What people do in narratives is not necessarily a good example for us. In fact it is usually the opposite.
5. Most of the characters in the Old Testament are far from perfect and their actions are too.
6. We are not always told at the end of a narrative whether what happened was good or bad. We should be able to judge this from what God has taught us elsewhere categorically in the Scriptures.
7. All narratives are incomplete. Not all the relevant details are always given. What appears is what inspired the author to think important to let us know.

8. Narratives are not written to answer all of our theological questions. They have particular, specific issues in which they deal with, leaving others to be dealt with elsewhere and in other ways.
9. Narratives may teach explicitly (by clearly stating something) or implicitly (by clearly implying something without actually saying it).
10. In the final analysis, God is always the hero of all biblical narratives, and all narratives ultimately find their full purpose and meaning in Jesus.

### **Some Final Cautions:**

Why is it that people often find things in narratives that isn't really there? First, it is because they are desperate for information that will help them, that will be of personal value that will apply to their own situation. Second, they are impatient; they want their answers now, from this book, from this chapter. Third, they wrongly expect that everything in the Bible directly is instruction for their own individual lives. Here is a list of eight of the most common errors people make when interpreting the bible. These all apply to narratives but are not limited to them.

1. *Allegorizing*. Trying to think of meanings beyond the clear intended message.
2. *Decontextualizing*. Ignoring the full historical and literary contexts, and often the individual narrative, people concentrate on small units only and thus miss interpretational clues.
3. *Selectivity*. Involves picking and choosing specific words and phrases to concentrate on, ignoring the others, and ignoring the overall sweep of the passage being studied.

4. *False Combination.* This approach combines elements from here and there in a passage and makes a point out of their combination, even though the elements themselves are not directly connected in the passage itself.
5. *Redefinition.* When the plain meaning leaves people cold, they often redefine it to mean something else.
6. *Extracanonical authority.* Using external keys to Scripture that claim to unlock the mysteries of truths not otherwise known from Scripture itself.
7. *Moralizing.* This assumes that a moral can be drawn from every passage. The fallacy of this approach is that it ignores the fact that the narratives were written to show the progress of God's history of redemption, not to illustrate principles.
8. *Personalizing.* This assumes that every passage applies to you specifically in a way that it may not to others. Do not forget that all parts of the bible are for everyone and ultimately for the Glory of God in displaying Him as the Hero.

No Bible narrative was written specifically about you. You can never assume that God expects you to do exactly the same thing that the Bible characters did, or to have the same things happen to you that happened to them. Narratives are precious to us because they so vividly demonstrate God's involvement in the world and illustrate his principles and calling. But remember they do not systematically include personal ethics.

## 6. ACTS: THE QUESTION OF HISTORICAL PRECEDENT

### **Acts: An Overview**

The exegesis of Acts includes historical questions like, what happened? But also the theological ones such as, why did Luke select and shape the text in this way? When reading Acts you must think paragraphs, like in the Epistles, but also move beyond that to think whole narratives and sections of the book. Also, like the Epistles, is it a good idea to read Acts in one sitting.

You will notice as you read Acts that at every key juncture, in every key person, the Holy Spirit plays the absolutely leading role. The following observations should help in understanding what Luke was and wasn't concerned with accomplishing with this Scripture.

1. The key to understanding Acts is Luke's interest in movement, orchestrated by the Holy Spirit, of the Gospel from its Jerusalem-based, Judaism-oriented beginnings to its becoming a worldwide, Gentile-predominant phenomenon. Any statement of purpose that does not include the Gentile mission and the Holy Spirit's role in that mission will surely have missed the point of this book.
2. The following are things that Luke does not tell us or is not concerned with. *First*, he has no interest in the biographies of the apostles. *Second*, he has little or no interest in church organization or polity. *Third*, there is no word about geographical expansion except one in the one direct line from Jerusalem to Rome.
3. Luke's interest does not seem to be with standardizing things, bringing everything into uniformity. The diversity that this creates probably means that no specific example is being set forth as the model Christian experience or church life.

4. However, it is thought that Acts intention is to serve as a model. But the model is not so much in the specifics as in the overall picture.

### **The Hermeneutics of Acts:**

It is thought that unless Scripture explicitly tells us we must do something, what is only narrated or described does not necessarily function in a normative way—unless it can be demonstrated on other grounds that the author intended it to function this way. In general, doctrinal statements derived from Scripture fall into three categories. (1) *Christian theology*, what Christians believe. (2) *Christian ethics*, how Christians ought to behave. (3) *Christian experience and Christian practice*, what Christians do. Within all of these categories exist two levels of statements referred to as *primary* and *secondary*. The *primary level* refers to things explicitly stated in Scripture. The *secondary level* is comprised of statements that are derived only incidentally by implication or by precedent. What is important to note here is that almost everything Christians derive from Scripture by way of precedent is in our third category, Christian experience or practice, and always at the secondary level.

The following principles apply to the hermeneutics of historical narrative:

1. The Word of God in Acts that may be regarded as normative for Christians is related to what any given narrative was *intended* to teach.
2. What is *incidental* to the primary intent may reflect the authors understanding of things, but it does not have the *same didactic value as what the narrative was trying to teach*.
3. Historical precedent, to have normative value, must be related to *intent*. If it can be shown that a given narrative is to establish precedent, than such precedent should be regarded as normative, speaking to all churches, at all times.

It should be noted, especially in cases where the precedent justifies a present action, that the precedent does not establish a norm for a specific action. The decision as to whether patterns or practices are repeatable should be guided by the following considerations. *First*, the strongest possible case can be made when only one pattern is found, and when that pattern is repeated in the New Testament itself. *Second*, when there is ambiguity of patterns or when a pattern occurs but once, it is repeatable for later Christians only if it appears to have divine approbation or is in harmony with what is taught elsewhere in Scripture. *Third*, what is culturally conditioned is either not repeatable at all, or must be translated into the new differing culture.

## 7. THE GOSPELS: *ONE STORY, MANY DIMENSIONS*

### **The Nature of the Gospels:**

Gospels may be divided roughly into *sayings* and *narratives*, that is, teachings of Jesus and stories about Jesus. Theoretically you should be able to use the principles of studying the Epistles for the one and the principles for historical narratives for the others. Having said this we need to look at the other dimensions of the Gospels that require additional strategy to study and understand. Almost all of the trouble in interpreting the Gospels stems from the fact that:

1. *Jesus himself did not write a gospel; they come from others, not from him.* Because of this reason to perform exegesis we need to think in terms of the historical setting of Jesus and the historical setting of the authors. You will also want to think about the historical context for each Jesus and the authors. Ask yourself why a certain gospel was written and when. One of the questions you will want to ask, even if it cannot be answered for certain, is whether Jesus' audience for a given teaching was his close disciples, the larger crowds, or his opponents
2. *There are four gospels.* For a variety of reasons the gospels written for one community or group of believers did not necessarily meet all of the needs in another community. So one was written first, Mark, and then rewritten twice, Matthew and Luke. Finally a fourth, John was written. All of these books exist with the same importance and authority because in each case the interest in Jesus is at two levels. *First*, the purely historical concern that this is who Jesus was and this is what he said and did; it is this Jesus, who was crucified and raised from the dead; whom we now worship as the risen Lord. *Second*, there was the existential concern of retelling the story for the need of

later communities that did not speak Aramaic or Greek, and lived in areas like Rome, Ephesus, or Antioch, where the Gospel was encountering an urban pagan environment.

These books which tell us virtually all we know about Jesus are not biographies they are “the memoirs of the apostles.” Four biographies could not stand side by side with equal value; these books stand side by side because they record the facts about Jesus, recall the teaching of Jesus, and bear witness to Jesus.

### **The Historical Context:**

Finding the historical context of Jesus can be a difficult task at best. This is because the way in which Jesus’ teaching was handed down. The content of the Gospels was passed on in individual stories and sayings (pericopes), not as whole Gospels. Some of these sayings were transmitted along with their original contexts. These are often referred to as pronouncement stories. Other stories and sayings did not include any historical context. This left the evangelist under their own guidance and that of the Holy Spirit to give the sayings present contexts. This is one of the reasons that that we often find the same saying or teaching in different contexts in the Gospels. This is also why sayings with similar themes, or the same subject matter, are often grouped in the Gospels in a topical way.

### **The Literary Context:**

The literary context has to do with the place of a given pericope in the context of any one of the Gospels. The concern for doing this is twofold: (1) to help you exegete or read with understanding a given saying or narrative in its present context in the Gospels, and (2) to help you understand the nature of the composition of the Gospels as wholes, and thus to interpret any one of the Gospels itself, not just isolated facts about the life of Jesus.

**Think Horizontally:** This means that when studying a pericope in any one gospel, one should be aware of the parallels in the other. There are two basic reasons for thinking horizontally. First, the parallels will often give us an appreciation for the distinctiveness of any one of the Gospels. Second, the parallels will help us to be aware of the different kinds of contexts in which the same or similar materials lived in the ongoing church. This is important in seeing how the same material was used in new contexts in the ongoing church.

**Think Vertically:** To think vertically means that when reading or studying a narrative or teaching in the Gospels, one should try to be aware of both historical contexts, that of Jesus and that of the evangelists. This is to help bring awareness that many of the gospel materials owe their present context to the evangelists, and that good interpretation may require appreciating a given saying first in its original historical context as a proper prelude to understanding that same word in its present canonical context.

## **8. THE PARABLES: DO YOU GET THE POINT**

### **The Parables in History:**

Parables have suffered misinterpretation second only to Revelation. One of the keys to understanding them, however, lies in discovering who the original audience to whom they were spoke; although many times they did come down to the evangelist without a context. It's not that Jesus was trying to be obtuse; he fully intended to be understood. It is our task to try and hear what Jesus' audience heard.

### **The Nature of Parables:**

The first thing to notice is that not all parables are the same kind. There is a basic difference between the Good Samaritan (true parable), the Leaven Meal (similitude), the saying "You are the salt of the earth" (metaphor), or "Do people pick grapes from thorn-bushes, or figs from thistles?" (epigram).

**Story Parable:** This is a story pure and simple. It has a beginning and an end; it also has something of a plot.

**Similitude:** These are illustrations taken from everyday life that Jesus would use to make a point.

**Metaphor or Simile:** Seem to function somewhat like a similitude but are spoken for a totally different reason. These can be detected by utilizing a figure of speech, which makes an implied comparison between things that are not literally alike

**Epigram:** Usually seen as a neat, witty, pointed saying.

### *How the Parables Function:*

The best clues as to what the parables are can be found in their *function*. Parables themselves are the message. They make a call for response. Because the nature of the parables assumes that the original audience understood the intended message we have to interpret them so we can begin to understand what they are trying to say.

### **The Exegesis of Parables:**

There are two things that captured the audience that heard Jesus' parables; knowledge of the points of reference, and noticing the unexpected turn. The points of reference can be discovered by doing good exegesis of the parable. After being able to identify all points of reference, identifying the unexpected turn will be quite easy.

Throughout the parable Jesus uses many elements for reference but only to help the audience get the point. Note well that a parable is not an allegory because of this. A true allegory would mean that every element within the story would have some meaning foreign to the story itself. The *point* of the parable is not in the points of reference as it would be in a true allegory. The *point* of the story is to be found in the response.

Here are three suggestions to help with the task of exegesis. (1) Sit and listen to the parable again and again. (2) Identify the points of reference intended by Jesus that would have been picked up by the original hearers. (3) Try to determine how the original hearers would have identified with the story, and therefore, what they would have heard.

**The Hermeneutical Question:**

The problem with the parables is that they were originally spoken in context to the original hearers and because of our cultural distance with that audience our immediate understanding of what Jesus was trying to say is limited. They need interpretation because we lack the immediate understanding that the original hearers had. Following are two suggestions on how to interpret the parables into our own lives after executing good exegesis.

1. The parables are presented in a written context and through exegesis we can discover what the point is with a fairly high degree of accuracy. At this point we will need to translate that same point into our own context. With the story parables one might try retelling the story in such a way that, with new points of reference, one's own hearers might feel the same emotions that the original audience felt.
2. Jesus' parables are in some way vehicles for proclaiming the kingdom. You must immerse yourself in the meaning of the kingdom in the ministry of Jesus.

## 9. THE LAW(S): COVENANT STIPULATIONS FOR ISRAEL.

### What the Law is:

The Old Testament contains over six hundred commandments, all of which are contained within four books; Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. While Genesis does not contain any of these commandments it is also considered to be part of the law. The largest problem for most Christians in reading and studying this portion of the bible is the hermeneutical question. The following guidelines should help in the understanding of the Old Testament Laws and covenant.

1. *The Old Testament Law is a covenant.* A covenant is a binding contract between two parties, both of whom have obligations specified in the covenant. The covenant format of the Old Testament Laws had six parts to it: preamble, prologue, stipulations, witnesses, sanctions, and document clause. The *preamble* identified the parties of the agreement. The *prologue* gave a brief history of how the parties became connected to one another. The *stipulations* are the individual laws themselves. The *witnesses* are those who will enforce the covenant. The *sanctions* are the blessings and curses that function as incentives for keeping the covenant. The *document clause* is the provision for regular review of the covenant so that it will not be forgotten.
2. *The Old Testament is not our testament (at least not apart from the New Covenant).* The Old Testament represents an old covenant, which is no longer binding to us. We have to assume that none of its stipulations are binding unless otherwise noted in the New Testament or New Covenant. God expects something different from us than he did those in the Old Covenant or Old Testament.

3. *Some stipulations of the Old Testament have clearly not been renewed in the New Covenant.* You can make two groups within the Pentateuchal laws that no longer apply to Christians of today. (1) The Israelite civil laws and (2) the Israelite ritual laws. The civil laws specify what penalties existed for various crimes. The ritual laws dealt with the specifics about worshipping God and the atonement of sin. Both of these groups of Laws only applied to the people of ancient Israel.
4. *Part of the Old Covenant is renewed in the New Covenant.* Some aspects of the old ethical laws are actually restated in the New Testament as applicable to Christians. Such laws derive their continued applicability from the fact that they serve to support the two chief laws of the New Covenant; love the Lord your God with all of your heart, your soul, and your mind; and love your neighbor as yourself.
5. *All of the Old Testament law is still the Word of God for us even though it is not still the command of God to us.* God wants us to know about all commands even if they are not directed at us personally. Care needs to be taken though that we understand that the Law can be used in both a good way and a negative way in the life of the Christian and this is often determined by how the Law is mediated (through Christ or through Moses).
6. *Only that which is explicitly renewed from the Old Testament law can be considered part of the New Testament "law of Christ."* The Ten Commandments as well as the two laws mentioned earlier; loving your God with heart, soul, and mind; and loving your neighbor as yourself.

### **The Old Testament Laws:**

The following definitions of the categories of Laws will help in defining what God was trying to instruct, therefore, allowing better understanding of how this portion of Scripture can apply to your lives.

*Apodictic Law:* Usually begins with do or do not. They are commands, telling the Israelites what they need to do to fulfill their part of the covenant with God. Throughout the study of these Laws one can begin to see how impossible it is to please God on our own. This also helps to show us that when reading the Old Testament we ought to be humble and appreciate how unworthy we are to belong to God.

*Casuistic Law:* These laws are case-by-case. These sorts of laws constitute a large portion of the more than six hundred commandments found in the Old Testament Pentateuchal law. None of these laws appear in the New Covenant. What we can gain from studying this kind of law is the demonstration of God's fairness and redemption that he granted. In these laws we often get a glimpse of the character of God.

*The Food Laws:* The majority of these laws have to do with God's protection of the Israelites. Most of the foods prohibited were more likely to carry disease, or were uneconomical to raise.

*Laws about the shedding of blood:* Sin always deserves punishment. God revealed to his people that one who sins against him does not deserve to live. But he provided a procedure by which a sinner could make atonement for his or her sins; a substitute of blood could be shed for redemption.

*Unusual Prohibitions:* These refer to laws such as "do not mate different animals," or "do not plant your field with two kind of seeds." The inspiration of these laws came from a desire of God to set his people apart from the Canaanites. The Canaanites believed in what is called "sympathetic magic," the idea that symbolic actions can influence the gods of nature. God could not bless his people if they practiced this kind of nonsense. These laws helped lead the Israelites away from a religion with no salvation, ultimately demonstrating God's love and plan for us.

*Laws giving blessings to those who keep them:* Such a law is neither punitive or restrictive. These laws give instructions for the benefit of keeping God's commandments.

### **Some Do's and Don'ts**

1. Do see the Old Testament law as God's fully inspired word *for* you, but don't always see it as God's direct command *to* you. Ultimately see God's law as a guardian that leads you to Jesus (see Galatians 3.19-24).
2. Do see the Old Testament law as the basis for the Old Covenant, and therefore Israel's history. However, don't see the law as binding on Christians in the New Covenant except where specifically renewed and mediated through Jesus.
3. See God's justice, love, and high standards revealed in the Old Testament law, but don't forget to see that God's mercy is made equal to the severity of the standards.
4. Don't see the Old Testament law as complete. It is not technically comprehensive. Do see the Old Testament law as a paradigm—providing examples for the full range of expected behavior.
5. Don't expect the Old Testament law to be cited frequently by the prophets or the New Testament. Remember that the essence of the law (Ten Commandments, and the two chief laws) is repeated in the prophets and the New Testament.
6. Do see the Old Testament laws as a generous gift from God to the Israelites, and don't see them as an annoying group of arbitrary regulations limiting people's freedom.

## **10. THE PROPHETS: *ENFORCING COVENANT IN ISRAEL.***

### **The Nature of the Prophecy:**

More individual books of the Bible come under the heading of prophecy than any other heading. Four major prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel) and twelve minor prophets (the final twelve books of the Old Testament), written between about 760 and 460 BC. The first mistake that most of us make when studying prophecy is our understanding of what the word means. Most Christians think that the prophets only spoke to the coming of Christ as well as hinting to the New Covenant. In fact, less than 2 percent of Old Testament prophecy is directly Messianic (this does not mean that all prophecy is not ultimately fulfilled in Christ). Less than 5 percent specifically describes the New Covenant age. Less than 1 percent concerns events yet to come.

The prophets did announce the future, but it was usually the immediate future of Israel, Judah, and other nations that surrounded them, rather than our own future. The purpose of the prophets was to speak to their own contemporaries, not just us.

In the prophetic books we hear from God via the prophets and very little about the prophets themselves. This is the aspect of the prophetic books that causes the most trouble in interpreting. Other areas of trouble are how the oracles were written. In the longer books or the major prophetic books there seems to be multiple oracles. They are not always presented in their original order and often given without hints to historical setting or where an oracle begins and the other ends. Also most oracles were spoken in poetry.

Another matter that complicates our understanding of the Prophets is the problem of historical distance. As people move farther and farther away from the religious, historical, and cultural life of ancient Israel, we have a hard time putting the words spoken by the Prophets in their proper context. It is hard for us to see what they are referring to and why.

### **The Function of Prophecy:**

The following guidelines should help in the process of studying the prophetic books of the Bible.

*The Prophets were covenant enforcement mediators.* God does not merely give his law, but enforces it. God announced the enforcement of his laws through the prophets, so that the event of his blessing or of his curse would be fully understood by his people. They functioned as God's mediators, or spokespersons, for the covenant. The blessings for covenant faithfulness fall into one of the following six categories: life, health, prosperity, agricultural abundance, respect and safety. The curses can mostly fit into one of ten categories starting with "d": death, disease, drought, dearth, danger, destruction, defeat, deportation, destitution, and disgrace. As you read the Prophets, look for this simple pattern: (1) an identification of Israel's sin or of God's love for her; (2) a prediction of curse or blessing depending on the circumstance.

*The prophet's message was not their own, but God's.* The prophets responded to a divine call. What we read in the prophetic books then, is not merely God's Word as the prophet saw it, but God's word as God wished the prophet to present it. The prophet does not act or speak independently.

*The prophet's message is unoriginal.* The message that the prophets delivered was more or less the same as the one that Moses gave. God raised up the prophets to gain the attention of the people to whom they were sent. The prophets are not inspired to make any points or announce any doctrines that are not already contained in the Pentateuchal covenant.

### **The Exegetical Task:**

When studying the prophetic books three tools can be very useful to aid in exegesis. The (1) *first*, a Bible dictionary, this will help to give a good introduction to the historical setting as well

as other background information. You should make it a practice to always read a dictionary article on the prophetic book before you start to study. The (2) *second* is to use a commentary. This will give more in depth analysis of background information but will also provide explanations of the meaning of the individual verses. The (3) third would be to use a Bible handbook. This is a combination of both. This a great resource when reading through multiple chapters and you only need a general amount of extra information and analysis.

It is also important to think oracles. You want to be able to separate the individual area of the prophecy. This will help to understand the audience better. If you know where the oracles begin and stop then you will know the sections where you need to find the specific context relevant to that oracle.

#### *Specific Contexts:*

Each prophetic oracle was delivered in a specific historical setting. A knowledge of the date, audience, and situation, therefore, when they are know, contributes substantially to a reader's ability to comprehend an oracle.

#### *The Forms of Prophetic Utterance:*

It is important to realize that oracles can take on different forms. Bible commentaries are wonderful resources to identify and explain the different forms. Below are the three most common forms you will find in prophetic writing.

1. *The lawsuit:* The full lawsuit form contains a summons, a charge, evidence, and a verdict, though these elements may sometimes be implied rather than explicit. The figurative style of this prophetic utterance is an effective way of communicating.
2. *The Woe:* "Woe" was the word ancient Israelites cried out when facing disaster or death, or when they mourned at a funeral. Woe oracles contain, either explicitly or implicitly, three

elements that characterize this form: an *announcement* of distress, the *reason* for distress, and a *prediction* of doom.

3. *The promise*: Another term for this kind of oracle is the salvation oracle. It can be identified by the following three elements; reference to the future, mention of radical change, and mention of the blessing.

#### *The Prophets as Poets:*

Many of the things during ancient times that were important enough to remember were considered appropriate for composition in poetry. This was in part due to the ease of remembering the words or lyrics of the poem because most individuals could not read or owned any books. All of the prophetic books contain a large amount of poetry and some are entirely comprised of poetry. The following features demonstrate three repetitive styles of Old Testament poetry.

1. *Synonymous parallelism*: The second or subsequent line repeats or reinforces the sense of the first line as in Isaiah 44.22

“I have swept your offenses like a cloud,  
your sins like the morning mist.”

2. *Antithetical parallelism*: The second or subsequent line contrasts the thought of the first, as in Hosea 7.14

“They do not cry out to me from their hearts,  
but wail upon their beds.”

3. *Synthetic parallelism*: The second or subsequent line adds to the first line in any manner, which provides further information, as in Obadiah 21

“Deliverers will go up from Mount Zion to govern the mountains of Esau.  
And the kingdom will be the Lord’s.”

### **Some Hermeneutical Suggestions**

Beyond sharing most of the same principles with the Epistles, we offer three further matters that should help in applying the information located in the prophetic books to your lives.

#### **1. A Caution: The Prophet as Foreteller of the Future.**

Yes, the prophets predicted events for the future but as discussed most of their predictions had to do with ancient Israel and Judah. They spoke of coming judgment or salvation in the relatively immediate future of ancient Israel. Be careful to not assume that all of the prophecies were focused on the New Testament. When reading the Prophets take note of the context, intent, style and wording.

#### **2. A Concern: Prophecy and Second Meanings.**

At a number of places in the New Testament, reference is made to Old Testament passages that do not appear to refer to what the New Testament says they do. These passages seem to have a clear meaning in their original Old Testament setting and yet are used in connection with a different meaning by a New Testament writer. This second meaning is commonly called *sensus plenior* or fuller meaning. This is apparent when we see New Testament writers expand on references made in the Old Testament that do not, within scripture, allow for this further meaning.

The problem for us with this second meaning is that we can not and should not make these connections. Only the authors of the New Testament are authorized to proclaim

their writings as inspired by the Holy Spirit. The difficult thing about these sorts of writings is that it takes no concern with the context, intent, style or wording of an Old Testament passage. They draw allegorical connections because the Holy Spirit inspired them to do so not because they were concerned with what the original Old Testament scripture intended. For us this second meaning when discovered through close examination of Scripture can provide further insight into the meanings of a particular passage of Old and New Testament writings.

**3. A Final Benefit: The Dual Emphasis on Orthodoxy and Orthopraxy.**

Orthodoxy is correct belief. Orthopraxy is correct action. Through the prophets God calls the ancient Israelite's and Judah to a balance of right belief and right action. This is the same thing the New Testament calls us to. Because God basically wants the same thing from us as he did of Israel and Judah we can use the Prophets as a constant reminder of God's determination to enforce his covenant.

## 11. THE PSALMS: ISRAEL'S PRAYERS AND OURS

The Psalms are a collection of inspired Hebrew prayers and hymns. The fact that the Psalms are often appended to copies of the New Testament and that they are used so often in worship and meditation has given this particular book a certain prominence. Yet despite the fact that they are well known, they are also misunderstood.

The problem with interpreting the Psalms arises primarily from their nature—what they are. Because the Bible is God's Word, most Christians automatically assume that all it contains are words *from* God to people. In fact the Bible also contains words spoken *to* God or *about* God, and that these words, too, are God's Word.

The Psalms are not propositions, or imperatives, or stories that illustrate doctrines, they do not function primarily for the teaching of doctrine or moral behavior. They are profitable when used for the purpose for which they were intended by God. (1) For us to express ourselves to God, (2) and to consider his ways.

### **Some Preliminary Exegetical Observations:**

When reading the Psalms you must understand their *nature*, including their various *types*, as well as their *forms* and *function*.

#### *The Psalms as Poetry:*

The most important thing to remember when studying the Psalms is that they are poems; musical poems. It is important to familiarize yourself with Hebrew poetry as we did in regards

to the Prophetic books, but there are also special points that need to be addressed in connection with the Psalms.

1. One needs to be aware that Hebrew poetry, by its very nature, was addressed, as it were, to the mind through the heart (i.e., much of the language is intentionally emotive). Therefore, you need to be careful in over-exegesis of the Psalms by finding special meanings in every word or phrase.
2. The Psalms are not just any kind of poem; they are musical poems. It is intended to have emotions, to evoke feelings rather than propositional thinking, and to stimulate a response on the part of the individual that goes beyond mere cognitive understanding of certain facts. While the Psalms contain and reflect doctrine, they are hardly repositories for doctrinal exposition. When you read a Psalm make sure that you do not derive from it meanings that were not intended by the musical poet who was inspired to write it.
3. It is also important to remember that the *vocabulary* of poetry is purposefully metaphorical. Thus one must take care to look for the point of the metaphor. An inability to appreciate symbolic language (metaphor and simile) and to translate into actual fact the more abstract symbolic notions of the psalm could lead a person to misapply it almost entirely.

#### *The Psalms as Literature:*

When studying the Psalms it is important to recognize certain literary features. Failure to note these features can lead to several errors of interpreting and application.

1. The Psalms are of several different *types*. It is important to realize that the Israelites knew all of the types. Therefore, to truly understand the Psalms one must invest the time to learn all of the types as well.

2. Each of the Psalms is also characterized by its *form*. By form we mean the particular type, as determined by the *characteristics* (especially structure) that it shares with other psalms of its type. When one understands the structure of a Psalm then one can follow what is happening in the psalm.
3. Each of the types of psalms is also intended to have a given *function* in the life of Israel. Each psalm has an intended purpose. It is not reasonable, for example, to take a royal psalm, which had its original function in the celebration of Israel's kingship as God endowed it, and read this at a wedding.
4. One must learn to recognize various *patterns* within the Psalms.
5. Each psalm must be read as a literary unit. The Psalms are to be treated as wholes, not atomized into single verses or thought of as many pearls on a string. Each psalm has a pattern of development by which its ideas are presented, developed, and brought to some kind of conclusion.

### **The Use of Psalms In Ancient Israel:**

The Psalms were *functional* songs. By functional we mean that they were not simply used as hymns are sometimes used today, spacing material to separate out parts of a worship service in preparation for the sermon. The Psalms served a crucial function of making connection between the worshiper and God. Therefore, the Psalms are very good at remaining applicable in *all* ages.

Eventually the Psalms were divided into five books. Book 1 (1-41); Book 2 (42-72); Book 3 (73-89); Book 4 (90-106); Book 5 (107-150).

## The Types of Psalms

It is possible to group the Psalms into seven different categories. These categories serve well to classify the Psalms and thus guide the reader toward good use of them.

1. *Lament*: Laments constitute the largest groups of psalms in the Psalter. There are more than sixty, including several corporate laments. *Individual* laments help a person express struggles, suffering, or disappointment to the Lord. *Corporate* laments do the same for a group rather than for an individual. The laments in the book of Psalms express with a deep, honest fervor the distress the people felt, therefore serving as a valuable tool for expression of concern to the Lord.
2. *Thanksgiving Psalms*: These psalms expressed joy to the Lord because something had gone well, or circumstances were good, and/or because people had a reason to render thanks to God for his faithfulness, and benefit. There are both community and individual psalms of thanksgiving.
3. *Hymns of Praise*: These psalms, without particular reference to previous miseries or to recent joyful accomplishments, center on the praise of God for who he is, for his greatness and his beneficence toward the whole earth, as well as his own people. God deserves praise. These psalms are especially adapted for individual or group praise in worship.
4. *Salvation History Psalms*: These psalms have as their focus a review of the history of God's saving work's among the people of Israel, especially his deliverance of them from bondage in Egypt and his creation of them as a people.
5. *Psalms of Celebration and Affirmation*: In this category include several kinds of psalms, all of which deal with different aspects of celebration and/or affirmation.

*Covenant Renewal Liturgies:* Designed to lead God's people to a renewal of the covenant he first gave to them on Mount Sinai. These psalms serve effectively as worship guidelines for a service of renewal.

*Davidic Covenant Psalms:* These psalms praise the importance of God's choice of the lineage of David. These psalms provide background for his messianic ministry.

*Royal Psalms:* There are nine psalms that deal especially with the kingship. The kingship in ancient Israel was an important institution, because through it God provided stability and protection. God works through intermediaries in society, and the praise function of these intermediaries is what we find in the royal psalms.

*Enthronement Psalms:* These psalms celebrate the enthronement of the king in ancient Israel, a ceremony that may have been repeated yearly. Some believe that they represent also the enthronement of the Lord himself, and were used as liturgies for some sort of ceremony which celebrated this.

*Song of Zion or Songs of the City of Jerusalem:* According to the predictions of God through Moses to the Israelites while they were in the wilderness, Jerusalem became the central city of Israel. Inasmuch as the New Testament makes much of the symbol of a New Jerusalem (heaven) these Psalms remain useful in Christian worship.

6. *Wisdom Psalms:* Eight Psalms can be placed in this category. Also Proverbs chapter 8 is considered a psalm, praising as all of them do, the merits of wisdom and the wise life. These psalms can be read profitably along with the book of Proverbs.

7. *Songs of Trust:* Ten psalms that center their attention upon the fact that God may be trusted, and that even in times of despair, his goodness and care for his people ought to be expressed. God delights in knowing that those who believe in him trust him for their lives and for what

he will choose to give them. These psalms can help us express our trust on God, whether we are doing well or not.

**Some Concluding Hermeneutical Observations:**

How do these words spoken to God function for us as a Word from God? Precisely in the ways they functioned in Israel in the first place—as opportunities to speak to God in words he inspired others to speak to him in times of past.

*Three Basic Benefits of the Psalms:*

From the use of the Psalms both in ancient Israel and in the New Testament church we can see three important ways in which Christians can use the Psalms.

1. Remember that the Psalms are a *guide to worship*. The worshipper who seeks to praise God, or to appeal to God, or to remember God's benefit, can use Psalms as a formal means of expression of his or her thoughts and feelings. It can help express our concerns in spite of our own lack of skill to find the right words.
2. The Psalms demonstrate to us how we can *relate honestly* to God. One can learn from the Psalms to be honest and open in expressing joy, disappointment, anger, or other emotions. To cry to God for help, or with other emotions, is not a judgment on his faithfulness, but an affirmation of it.
3. The Psalms demonstrate the importance of *reflection and meditation* upon things that God has done for us. They invite us to prayer, to controlled thinking upon God's Word (that is what meditation is), and to reflective fellowship with other believers.

## 12. WISDOM: *THEN AND NOW*

### **The Nature of Wisdom:**

Three Old Testament books are commonly known as wisdom books. Ecclesiastes, Proverbs, and Job. Also a number of Psalms can be included into this category. Finally, there is the Song of Songs, also commonly called the Song of Solomon. All of these books contain a great deal of material considered to be wisdom. Wisdom, as it applies to Christians is, the ability to make godly choices in life.

### *Abuse of Wisdom Literature:*

Traditionally the Wisdom books have been misused in three different ways. (1) People often read these books in parts. They fail to see that there is an overall message according to the inspired author's intentions. (2) People often misunderstand wisdom terms and categories as well as wisdom styles and literary modes. Thus they misdefine the terms used in the Bible in wisdom contexts. (3) People often fail to follow the line of argument in a wisdom discourse. Accordingly, they try to live by what was intended to be understood as incorrect.

### *Who Is Wise?*

Wisdom is not something theoretical and abstract—it is something that exists only when a person thinks and acts according to the truth, as he or she makes many choices that life demands. The wise person is highly practical not just theoretical. Wisdom literature sought to evaluate how best to make life's choices, while remaining grounded in the only good choices or godly choices. The very first step in biblical wisdom is knowing God, not abstractly or theoretically, but in the concrete sense of committing your life to him. Wisdom literature then, tends to focus on people and their ability to make godly choices and whether or not they are learning how to apply God's truth to the experiences they have.

### *The Limits of Wisdom:*

It is important to remember that not all wisdom in the ancient world was godly or orthodox. Moreover, wisdom does not cover all of life. Intensely practical, it tends not to touch upon the theological or historical issues so important elsewhere in the Bible. Remember that only when wisdom as a skill, is subordinate to obedience to God, does it achieve its proper ends in the sense of the Old Testament means.

### **Ecclesiastes: Cynical Wisdom**

This book is a wisdom monologue that is often puzzling to those who read it carefully. Its consistent message throughout (until the last verses) is that the reality of life and finality of death mean that life has no ultimate value. If we are all going to die anyway who cares if you're good or not?

Everything about the book, everything but the final two verses, represents a brilliant, artful argument for the way one would look at life—if God did not play a direct, intervening role in life and if there were no life after death. The true aim of the book, however, is to show that such a view of life would leave you cold. When one relegates God to a position way out there away from us, irrelevant to our lives, then Ecclesiastes is the result. The book thus serves as a reverse apologetic for cynical wisdom; it drives its readers to look further because the answers that the author of this book gives are so discouraging.

### **Wisdom In Job:**

The book of Job contains all sorts of wrong advice and incorrect conclusions as they come from the lips of Job's well-meaning "comforters." This book takes the form of a highly structured conversation or dialogue.

Job's comforters represent the viewpoint that God is not simply involved but is constantly meting out his judgment through the events of Job's life. They express the commentary that what happens to you in life, good or ill, is a direct result of whether you have pleased God or not. Their message is that when life goes well for a person, that is a sign that he or she has chosen to do what is good, but when things go bad, it is obvious that that person has sinned against God.

The reader of the book of Job learns what is simply the world's wisdom, seemingly logical but actually wrong, and what constitutes God's wisdom and what builds confidence in God's sovereignty and righteousness. Thus the dialogue and the story line combine to make the Old Testament's paramount exemplar of speculative wisdom.

### **Wisdom In Proverbs:**

The book of Proverbs is the primary locus of prudential wisdom—that is, rules and regulations people can use to help themselves make responsible, successful choices in life. Proverbial wisdom focuses mostly on *practical attitudes*.

An important thing to remember about Proverbs is that in Hebrew they are called *meshallim* (figure of speech, parable, or specially contrived saying). A proverb is a *brief, particular* expression of truth. The briefer the statement the less likely it is to be totally precise and universally applicable. They must be understood reasonably and taken on their own terms. They do not state everything about a truth but point *toward* it. They tend to use *figurative* language and express things suggestively rather than in detail. Proverbs can also be like parables in that they express their truth in a symbolic way.

Proverbs are not a categorical, always applicable, ironclad promises, but a more general truth; it teaches that lives according to God and lived according to his will succeed according to God's definition of success. When the Proverbs, then, are taken on their own terms, and understood as a special category of *suggestive* truth that they are, they become important and useful adjuncts for living.

*Some Hermeneutical Guidelines:*

Proverbs state a wise way to approach certain selected practical goals but do so in terms that cannot be treated like a divine warranty of success. The particular blessings, rewards, and opportunities mentioned in Proverbs are likely to follow if one will choose the wise courses of actions outlined in the poetical, figurative language of the book.

If you approach Proverbs from a literalistic, extreme interpretation, you will miss the point of the proverb. A proverb frames the truth, in specific, narrow terms that are intended to point toward the broader principle rather than to express something technically.

Each inspired proverb must be balanced with others and understood in comparison with the rest of Scripture. Moreover, you must guard against letting their practical concern with material things and this world make you forget the balancing value of other Scriptures that warn against materialism and worldliness.

No proverb is a complete statement of truth. No proverb is so perfectly worded that it can stand up to the unreasonable demand that it apply to every situation at every time. The more briefly and parabolically a principle is stated, the more common sense is needed to interpret it properly. Proverbs tries to impart knowledge that can be retained rather than philosophy that can impress a critic.

Many proverbs express their truths according to practices and institutions that no longer exist, although they were common to Old Testament Israelites. Unless you think of these proverbs in terms of their modern equivalents their meaning may seem irrelevant or be lost to you altogether. Following is a list of some rules that will help you make proper use of proverbs and be true to their divinely inspired intent.

1. Proverbs are often parabolic, i.e., figurative, pointing beyond themselves.
2. Proverbs are intensely practical, not theoretically theological
3. Proverbs are worded to be memorable, not technically precise.
4. Proverbs are not designed to support selfish behavior—just the opposite.
5. Proverbs strongly reflecting ancient culture may need sensible translation so as to not lose their meaning.
6. Proverbs are not guarantees from God, but poetic guidelines for good behavior.
7. Proverbs may use highly specific language, exaggeration, or any a variety of literary techniques to make their point.
8. Proverbs give good advice for wise approaches to certain aspects of life, but are not exhaustive in their coverage.
9. Wrongly used, Proverbs might justify a crass, materialistic lifestyle. Rightly used, they will provide practical advice for daily living.

### **Wisdom in the Song of Songs:**

The Song of Songs is a lengthy love song. It is an extended ballad of human romance, written in a style of the Near Ancient Eastern lyric poetry. The focus of this book is to provide its readers with the answers of whom to love and how to love. These are the two issues that the Song is mainly concerned with.

The Song has had a long tradition of odd translation, based on a combination of two common kinds of hermeneutical mistakes: *totality transfer* and *allegorizing*. Totality transfer is the tendency to think that all the possible features and meanings of a word or concept come with it whenever it is used. Allegorizing is interpreting writing as a figurative form that leads to abstract ideas about what the text is saying.

Here are some of the considerations that will help you use the Song in the way Scripture intends:

1. Try to appreciate the overall ethical context of the Song of Songs. Monogamous, heterosexual marriage was the proper context for sexual activity, according to God's revelation in the Old Testament, and God-fearing Israelites would regard the Song in that light. The attitude of the Song is the very antithesis of unfaithfulness, either before or after marriage. Marriage consummates and continues love between a man and a woman. That is what the Song points towards.
2. Be aware of the genre of the Song. Its closet parallels are indeed love poetry of the Old Testament and elsewhere in ancient Near East, the context of which was not just love of any kind, but attraction in marriage. There is a solid moral overtone and a focusing of love into the right context.

3. Read the Song as suggesting godly choices rather than describing them in a technical manner. They are true as suggestions and generalizations rather than precise statements of universal fact.
  
4. Be aware that the Song focuses on very different values from those of modern culture. Our culture encourages people to fulfill themselves, whatever their sexual tastes, whereas the Song is concerned with how one person can respond faithfully to the attractiveness of and fulfill the needs of another. In the Song, romance is something that should continue throughout and actually characterize marriage.

### 13. THE REVELATION: *IMAGES OF JUDGEMENT AND HOPE*

#### **The Nature of Revelation:**

The hermeneutical problems are intrinsic. The book is in the canon; thus it is God's Word, inspired by the Holy Spirit. Yet when we come to hear that Word, most of us in the church today hardly know what to make of it. At the same time, however, there is a rich, diverse symbolism, some of which is manageable while some is obscure. Most of the problems stem from the symbols, plus the fact that the book deals with future events, but at the same time is set in a recognizable first-century context.

The first key to the exegesis of Revelation is to examine the kind of literature it is. Revelation is a unique, finely blended combination of three distinct literary types: apocalypse, prophecy, and letter. Furthermore, the basic type, apocalypse, is a literary form that does not exist today.

#### *The Revelation as Apocalypse:*

The Revelation is primarily an apocalypse. Some of the common characteristics of an apocalypse follow.

1. Apocalyptic literature was concerned with judgment and salvation. Its great concern was no longer with God's activity within history. The apocalyptics looked exclusively forward to the time that God would bring a violent end to history.
2. Apocalypses are literary works from the beginning. John was told to write what he had seen not to verbally communicate it.
3. Most frequently the stuff of apocalyptic is presented in the form of visions or dreams, and its language is cryptic and symbolic. Therefore, most of the apocalypses contained literary

devices intended to give the book a sense of hoary age. The most important of these devices was pseudonymity, that is, they were given the appearance of having been written by ancient worthies, who were told to seal up their writing for a later day.

4. The images in this writing are often forms of fantasy, rather than reality.

5. Most are very formally stylized. There was a strong tendency to divide time and events into neat packages. There was also a great fondness for the symbolic use of numbers and symbols. As a consequence, the final product usually has the visions in carefully arranged, often numbered, sets. Frequently these sets, when put together, express something without necessarily trying to suggest that each separate picture follows hard on the heel of the former.

The Revelation of John fits all of these categories but one. And that one difference is so important that in some ways it becomes a world of its own. Revelation is not Pseudonymous. John made himself know to his readers. He also did not seal up the book because he was inspired to distribute the message now.

*The Revelation as Prophecy:*

John calls his book “this prophecy,” and says that the “testimony of Jesus,” for which he and the churches are suffering “is the spirit of prophecy.” This probably means that the message of Jesus, attested by him and to which John and the churches bear witness, is the clear evidence that the prophetic Spirit had come. Therefore, what makes John’s Apocalypse different is the combination of apocalyptic and prophetic elements. John clearly intends this book to be a prophetic word to the church. It was a word from God for their present situation.

### *The Revelation as Epistle:*

It must be noted that this combination of apocalyptic and prophetic elements has been cast into the form of a letter. John speaks to his reader in the first/second person formula. The significance of this is that there is an occasional aspect to the Revelation. It was occasioned at least in part by the needs of the specific church to which it was addressed. Therefore, to interpret, we must try to understand its original historical context.

### **The Necessity of Exegesis:**

Exegesis is especially important when studying Revelation. It is the lack of this that has led to so many speculative and bad interpretations.

1. The first task is to seek the author's original intent. The primary meaning of Revelation is what John intended it to mean, which in turn must also have been something his readers could have understood it to mean.
2. Since the Revelation intends to be prophetic, one must be open to the possibility of a second, higher meaning, inspired by the Holy Spirit. However, such a meaning lies beyond what we can correctly define. Therefore, what we need to do is understand what John was intending his original readers to hear and understand.
3. One must be careful to not overuse the analogy of Scripture when interpreting Revelation. The analogy of Scripture means that Scripture is to be interpreted in the light of other Scripture. Therefore any keys to interpreting Revelation must be intrinsic to the text of the Revelation itself or otherwise available to the original recipients from their own historical context.

4. Because of the apocalyptic nature of the book there can be some exegetical problems specifically in regards to some on the imagery.

a. One must have sensitivity to the rich background of ideas that have gone into the composition of the Revelation. The chief source of these ideas and images is the Old Testament, but John has derived images from apocalyptic and even from ancient mythology.

b. Apocalyptic images are of several kinds

c. When John interprets his images, these interpreted images must be held firmly and must serve as a starting point for understanding others.

d. One must see the visions as wholes and not allegorically press all the details. In this matter the visions are like parables. The whole vision is trying to say something; the details are either (1) for dramatic effect, (2) to add to the picture of the whole so that the readers will not mistake the points of reference.

5. Apocalypses in general, and the Revelation in particular, seldom intend to give a detailed, chronological account of the future. John's concern is that, despite present appearances, God is in control of history and the church. And even though the church will experience suffering and death, it will be triumphant in Christ, who will judge his enemies and save his people.

### **The Historical Context:**

The place to begin one's exegesis is with provisional reconstruction of the situation that it was written. Try to read it all in one sitting, reading it for the big picture. As you read take notes on the main points, the author and his readers. Understanding that John wrote this book while in exile is crucial in understanding the occasion of the letter.

The main themes are abundantly clear. Church and state are on a collision course; and the initial victory will appear to belong to the state. But the prophetic word is one of encouragement; for God is in control of all things. God will finally pour out his wrath upon those who caused suffering and death and bring eternal rest to those who remain faithful.

It is also important to understand the distinction that John makes between tribulation and wrath. Tribulation (suffering and death) is clearly part of what the church was enduring and was yet to endure. God's wrath on the other hand, is his judgment that is to be poured out upon those who have afflicted God's people.

### **The Literary Context:**

To understand any one of the specific visions on the Revelation it is especially important not only to wrestle with the background and meaning of the images (the content questions) but also to ask how a particular vision functions in the book as a whole. One must think paragraphs because every paragraph is a building block for the whole argument. The book is creatively structured whole, and each vision is an integral part of that whole.

### **The Hermeneutical Questions:**

The hermeneutical difficulties with the Revelation are much like those of the prophetic books. As with all other genres, God's Word to us is to be found first of all in his Word to them. But in contrast the Prophets the Revelation often speaks about things yet to be.

Our difficulties do not lie with understanding God's Word of warning and comfort. Our difficulties lie with that other phenomenon of prophecy, namely that the temporal world is often so closely tied to the final eschatological realities.

1. We need to learn that pictures of the future are just that—pictures. Thus when the four trumpets proclaim calamities on nature as a part of God’s judgment, we must not necessarily expect a literal fulfillment of those pictures.
2. Some of the pictures that were intended primarily to express the certainty of God’s judgment must not also be interpreted to mean soon-ness, at least from our limited perspective.
3. The pictures where the temporal is closely tied to the eschatological should not be viewed as simultaneous. The eschatological dimension of the judgments and of the salvation should alert us to the possibility of a not-yet dimension to many of the pictures.
4. Although there are probably many instances where there is a second, yet to be fulfilled, dimension to the pictures, we have been given no keys as to how we are to pin these down.
5. The pictures that were intended to be totally eschatological are still to be taken so. This we should affirm as God’s Word yet to be fulfilled. But even these are pictures; the fulfillment will be in God’s own time, in his own way.

Just as the opening word of Scripture speaks of God and creation, so the concluding words speak of God and consummation. If there are some ambiguities for us as to how all the details are to work out, there is no ambiguity as to the certainty that God will work it all out—in his time and in his way. Such certainty should serve for us, as for them, to warn and to encourage.