

QuickPod 2 - Why Do You Interpret the Bible That Way?

I recently had the privilege of playing checkers with my young granddaughter. She's a very intelligent and crafty young lady, never missing a loophole in the rules. On a particular move she made, I couldn't let it slide...

"You can't do that," I corrected.

"Why?"

"Because that's the rule."

"Why?"

"Because the person who invented checkers said so."

"Why can't I say it different?" she asked.

I had no good answer at the moment, so we changed the rules.

A similar situation occurred in one of my science classes. While going over some physics equations, I stated that a certain variable had to be in a certain range.

"Why?" A student asked.

"Because that's what works."

"Why?"

"Because that the way the universe is," I attempted to move on. "Over the centuries scientists have observed what works and what doesn't. We didn't make up the equations—we *discovered* them."

The science of interpreting the Bible is called hermeneutics. There are definite methods and considerations that allow us to understand the Bible more easily and correctly. Contrary to what many want to believe, these generally aren't arbitrary, human-made rules as in checkers. They are time-tested guidelines that have been *discovered* as effective means to understand Scripture. We want to make it clear to our listeners why we take particular lines of reasoning in our articles and podcasts.

Let's look at a few of these principles...

1. We believe the Bible is *perspicuous*—a fancy word that simply means "intended to be understood." I hear some complain that God's Word is complicated, puzzling, and often shrouded in symbolism. There are likely exceptions, but it seems these are usually people who haven't attempted to read and understand Scripture, or they have some reason to avoid understanding it. My recommendation for someone who is concerned about the symbolism in Scripture is to for now just read the 98% that has nothing to do with symbolism.

This is not to say that all of Scripture is kindergarten simple. Every time I read the Bible it seems I find some new insight I didn't see before. Dedicated believers spend lifetimes mining treasures from it. But the *main things* are the *plain things*. Even children can (and do) comprehend what God's Word says about salvation, the Christian life, and most of the other crucial spiritual concepts.

Furthermore, perspicuous doesn't necessarily imply zero effort. I had a former student who asked on the first day of class, "Is this course easy?"

"Yes," I said. (It was after all a basic course.) "Most students who take it get an 'A.'"

After having skipped most of the class sessions and turning in roughly a fourth of the assignments, the student stormed into my office and said, "Easy? You gave me an 'F!' Bottom line—Read the Bible.

Some compare the Bible to a love letter. That's a good description. It is very much a love letter to us from God. I was never an expert at writing love letters, but back in the day, I received such correspondence from my future wife. If she sent a note that said "Let's hang out in the

student center” I wouldn’t think “Hmm, maybe that’s symbolic and she really means the library. No, I knew her... I was familiar with how she communicated. I would take the note to be *perspicuous*.

2. It’s important to know the writer and the reader. Did you notice in the previous message from my wife there actually was a figure of speech? She said, “hang out.” That idiom would probably be confusing to a non-English speaker. But I knew I didn’t need to take a rope with me. I knew *her* and I understood her style of communicating. She also knew *me* and I factored that into her communication. That’s why Scripture urges us to study it. Believers need to be familiar with God’s “style” and how he relates to us. That often takes time and effort.

3. It’s important to know the context. Writer and reader are part of the context, but it goes much deeper. Every part of the Bible was written *to* someone and *for* someone. Obviously, every word was written *for* the person(s) *to* whom it was written. But the entire Bible was also meant *for* us. For example, the book of Proverbs was written by Solomon to his son. However, no one reading the collection of wise sayings would doubt that God intended for this wisdom to be received and used by us.

I’ve been in Bible study groups during which the entire session revolved around “What does this scripture mean to me?” Possibly a good question at some point—it usually misses the mark of true understanding. Let’s look at a method of studying a passage from God’s Word that has worked well for many students of scripture over the centuries. For simplicity, we do this by first considering 3 questions about the passage:

What does it *say*?

What does it *mean*?

What does it mean *to me*?

What does it say?

In the King James translation of the Bible, 1 Thessalonians 4:15 says “... we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep.”

The KJV is a solid, time-tested translation which I use often, but it is 1000-yr-old English. Back then, the word “prevent” in this translation meant “precede.” Thus, the verse actually “says” *precede* even though it literally says *prevent*. It’s a crucial starting point to know what a passage *says*.

Spoiler... Scripture wasn’t written in English.

Assuming you’re reading this and aren’t also fluent in Greek, Hebrew, or Aramaic, the Bible you read is a translation of the original manuscripts. However, most of our statements of faith say that we believe “divine inspiration” is credited to the originals only. Let me be clear. Our mainline English translations are dependable. KJV, NKJV, NIV, ESV, NASV, etc are very true to the original manuscripts.

So, what does all this mean to me on a practical level? It means I can read my English versions with no worries. I believe God has maintained the integrity of the Scriptures through the process of translation. The main and plain things will still shine through clearly. I can still trust the Holy Spirit to supernaturally guide, encourage, and correct me through the translated words and phrases, but it will still take effort on my part to know what they *say*.

Having said this, what about the nuances of Scripture? What about those details that perhaps aren't essential for salvation and sanctification, but are still useful and important? Relax again! We still have reliable copies of the original manuscripts.

Then do I need to learn Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic? Well, if you wish. It would certainly be useful. However, there are very good lexicons available. These are dictionaries of original manuscript terms with scholarly explanations of their meanings, many of which are available online. I use these frequently to get the fullest meaning of what my translation says.

What does it mean?

As I mentioned, although Scripture was written *for* us (all people), it was first written *to* a particular audience. It was written to be *understood* by the original audience. This is an important principle in interpreting the Bible. How did the original recipients interpret what was said? Context is everything!

For example, the New Testament was written primarily *by* and *to* “second-temple Jews.”¹ In John 9, when Jesus and his disciples encounter a blind beggar one of them said, “Teacher, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” That’s probably not our first thought when we see a person with a disability today. However, the Jewish belief at that time (whether or not true) was that deformities were the result of sin. Understand the disciples’ thinking helps us understand Jesus’s response to them.

Many Christians are concerned about the similarities between the Old Testament and some older stories from the pagan world at that time. Did Moses plagiarize the creation account from the early Mesopotamians? That’s an accusation of skeptics. In this case, it helps to know a popular literary device used at the time of Moses. It was common to take an account believed to be false and rewrite it with corrections. These polemics were edgy ways of arguing a truth (much as we might use sarcasm) and the recipients of them would understand what the writer was saying: This previous account has errors—I’m fixing them.

There are a variety of contextual aspects that must be considered for each book of the Bible, such as the participants’ history, politics, culture, beliefs, and environment. Errors in theology often occur when someone attempts to interpret Scripture in a modern context. Fortunately, there are many resources available to help us understand the context of the Bible.

What does it mean to me?

Finally, I can ask how this passage applies to me, here, right now, in my immediate situation. It’s very important at this point not to stray from what it *says* or what it *means*. Furthermore, we must be wary of taking a passage out of the context of surrounding verses or chapters. True, we may be able to do that with some passages, such as the ever-popular John 3:16. However, while enduring a particular trial, I’ve had well-meaning people quote to me, “I know the plans I have for you... plans to prosper you and not to harm you” (Jeremiah 29:11). In context, this was written specifically to Jews of the Babylonian exile.

Ouch! So, God doesn’t want to prosper me and not harm me? Well, maybe not at the present. There were times in Paul’s life when he was certainly being harmed and was not prospering. The point is, God does work things for my ultimate good, but I shouldn’t take it as a personal promise.

¹ Jews from 500 BC through the time of Jesus and the disciples.

But having said what *not* to do, the purpose of Scripture is to make as many personal applications as possible. God expects us to know what the Bible says and what it means. Only then can we allow the Spirit to lead us in becoming more like Christ. Paul advised the young Timothy...

“All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16).